



Common Ground

Insights for stronger African coordination in BRICS

An outcome document from Common Ground: An African BRICS Policy Retreat, held in Pretoria on 27 and 28 May 2026

Co-hosted by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the South African BRICS Think Tank (SABTT)



South African
BRICS Think Tank



Executive summary



Africa is now one of the most represented regions in BRICS, with three full members, South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia, and two partner states, Nigeria and Uganda.¹ This presents an opportunity to strengthen coordination around shared continental priorities, particularly economic integration, industrialisation and development finance. Yet the three members engage with the grouping through separate national channels and have no common reference point to compare positions before decisions are taken. A weakening trade order, contested supply chains in minerals and technology, recurring debt distress and rising geopolitical tensions all raise the cost of that gap.

This document sets out, from an African vantage point, where coordination among the three is achievable, where it is harder and what would make it work. It is offered to the three Sherpa teams and to the wider tracks – the Think Tank Council, the Academic Forum and the business, youth, civil and women's councils – as a contribution to their preparations for the 18th summit in New Delhi, not as an instruction.

The central proposition is modest and practical. The three can adopt a coordinating practice comparable to that of the ²A3 in the UN Security Council by comparing positions in advance and deciding on which matters a common line will serve their interests, while bringing a stronger collective voice into the room. This is offered as a method that can add value, not as a requirement or as something other regions in BRICS already do as a matter of course. The African BRICS members do not represent the continent and should not claim to do so; coordination is worth pursuing for the leverage it gives each of them on questions where their interests already align.

¹BRICS now has 10 full members: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, joined in January 2024 by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, and in January 2025 by Indonesia. Saudi Arabia was invited but has not yet formally taken up membership. The African partner states are Nigeria and Uganda, among the wider group of partner countries announced in 2025.

²The A3 refers to the three African elected members of the UN Security Council, who consult and, where they agree, vote together on African questions under a continental mandate. It is used here only as a reference point for a coordinating method; the three African members of BRICS hold no comparable mandate.

Before New Delhi, the immediate and achievable steps are:

- A single pre-summit consultation among the three, at the Sherpa or ministerial level, to compare priorities and agree on two or three thematic areas on which to coordinate, anchored where possible in commitments they have already made under Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- a short joint analytical input on those areas, produced through the think tank and academic tracks; and
- one concrete, practical economic step to test the approach, such as a shared position on value-chain language or a jointly prepared project proposal to the New Development Bank (NDB).

Over the next two to three years, the longer build is:

- A light, standing coordination arrangement, convened on a rotating basis rather than housed in any one capital, and working through the Sherpa level and the existing councils rather than as a new body;
- a co-anchored, openly accessible record of African priorities and their progress, maintained across the three think tank communities; and
- a deliberate strengthening of the people-to-people, youth and women's tracks, alongside a domestic feedback loop in each country.

The economic and development areas are where coordination pays off first. On the contested questions of UN Security Council reform and geopolitics, where the three diverge, the realistic contribution is a shared method rather than a common position.

The retreat and its method

'Common Ground: An African BRICS Policy Retreat' was convened by SAIIA and SABTT on 27 and 28 May 2026 as a closed working retreat rather than a conference. It brought together researchers, analysts and think tank practitioners from South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia, including the three national focal institutions of the BRICS Think Tank Council: the South African BRICS Think Tank, the Institute of Foreign Affairs in Addis Ababa and the Information and Decision Support Centre in Cairo. Representatives of the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation and of the Egyptian and Ethiopian embassies in Pretoria took part in an opening framing session.

The retreat had two aims. The first was to begin shaping an African identity within BRICS and find a practical way to coordinate ahead of the New Delhi summit, at a time when each of the three is defining or revising its own approach to the grouping. The second was to strengthen relationships among African track-two institutions and lay a foundation for cooperation that outlasts a single event.

The two days played different roles. Day one ran as a series of fishbowl discussions, a participatory format in which a few lead voices open each theme and any participant may step into the conversation as it develops, favouring exchange over set-piece presentation. Day two converted that discussion into text. The day-one sessions were recorded and, along with participants' notes, synthesised overnight using an AI tool into a structured starting draft. That draft served only as a point of departure: the working groups then challenged, reworked and agreed on it, with each group taking a section and rotating to review the others, so that every paragraph was read and shaped by participants. A final round of refinement is taking place online in the two weeks after the retreat.

The method has clear limits, and naming them matters. The overnight synthesis was an imperfect starting point. It was generated transparently, with explicit instructions on tone and spelling and a deliberate avoidance of jargon, and was treated throughout as something to be corrected rather than trusted, with its figures and attributions checked against the record.

The retreat was held under the Chatham House Rule, so nothing here is attributed to an individual or a delegation. The group was deliberately small, which favoured candour over representativeness. And the document is a collective reflection rather than the negotiated position of any government; it is offered to inform preparations, not to pre-empt them. Co-authorship is offered to participating researchers and institutions that wish to be associated with it, and those who prefer to contribute without attribution remain free to do so.

Participants

The retreat brought together researchers, analysts and practitioners from across the three African BRICS members, as well as the SAIIA and SABTT organising team. Government representatives took part only in the opening framing session.

Inclusion in the list below reflects participation in the retreat and consent to be named. It does not imply agreement with every argument in this document, which is a collective reflection of the discussion and does not represent the views of any individual participant, their institution or their government. Names appear only where participants have consented, and the text remains non-attributional in keeping with the Chatham House Rule. Participants who prefer to contribute without being named remain free to do so.

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Africa in BRICS

Africa's place in BRICS has grown quickly and unevenly. South Africa joined in 2010; Egypt and Ethiopia became full members at the start of 2024; and Nigeria and Uganda were among the partner states admitted in 2025.

BRICS is not a treaty organisation. It has no charter, permanent secretariat or fixed headquarters and makes decisions by consensus, a method its members regard as a value rather than a constraint. That method is expressed in the working principle of agreeing to disagree: when a question proves too divisive, it is set aside rather than forced, and members spend their energy where agreement is within reach. BRICS now has 10 members and, measured in purchasing-power terms, accounts for roughly two-fifths of global output, close to half the world's population and more than a quarter of world trade. It works across three broad pillars: an intergovernmental track of summits and ministerial meetings; an economic and business track; and a people-to-people track of councils and forums.

These are supported by an increasing number of bodies, including the NDB, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement and five standing councils: the Business Council, the Think Tank Council, the Youth Council, the Civil BRICS Council and the Women's Business Alliance.

Three labels recur in what follows and are kept distinct: the pillars are the intergovernmental, economic and people-to-people structures; the councils are the five standing bodies; and the retreat's three themes – coordination, global governance and economic cooperation – describe how the discussion itself was organised.

The three African full members engage this architecture separately. Each came to BRICS with its own foreign policy tradition and organises its participation along its own national Sherpa and ministerial lines. There is no point at which the three compare positions before those positions are settled. That a distinct African practice of coordination has not yet formed is, in large part, a function of time: only since 2024 has the continent had more than one full member. A coordinating practice realistically begins to take shape from here rather than having already failed.

In addition, the grouping's coordination machinery is dense, with more than 190 mechanisms identified in one recent mapping. Yet none of these serves as a vehicle for the three to consult one another, and the African chapters of several councils have not been convened by all three. The external environment lends urgency to the question. Trade rules are weakening; unilateral tariffs and export controls have returned; the supply chains for critical minerals and digital infrastructure are contested; and established institutions are visibly strained. Decisions taken in distant capitals on tariffs, sanctions, technology and reserve arrangements directly affect African economies, often without African voices in the room.

Because BRICS operates by consensus, no member is obliged to accept an outcome to which it has not agreed. The risk is rather that, without coordination, the African dimension of a debate is shaped by others while the three speak separately. BRICS is one of the few organised platforms in which development finance, trade, technology and governance reform can be pressed from a vantage point that is different from, if not necessarily opposed to, the established Western one. This is part of what makes the effort of coordination worthwhile.

A defining moment

The 18th BRICS Summit takes place in New Delhi on 12 and 13 September 2026, with India as chair, and under the theme of building resilience, innovation, cooperation and sustainability. Several of India's stated priorities map closely onto African concerns and open natural points of entry for coordinated engagement:

Artificial intelligence (AI) for development

Climate finance

The reform of multilateral institutions

The integration of partner countries

The new industrial revolution and small and medium-sized enterprises

Two live processes give the moment an immediate purchase. The grouping is renewing its Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership to 2030, which is the central economic text that the three could help shape. At the same time, its cross-border payments work, including the BRICS Pay initiative, is being carried towards the summit.

Two further features make the timing favourable. Expansion has made BRICS more heterogeneous, with open differences over the pace of further expansion, contested geopolitical questions and the depth of reform. In a larger, less settled grouping, a subgroup that arrives with agreed-upon positions tends to carry more weight than scattered individual voices. And each of the three African members is now defining or revising its approach.

South Africa is consolidating its BRICS strategy for 2026–2030 into a single cabinet submission expected by the end of the year, so the analysis here can inform a decision that is actually being taken. As the longest-standing member, South Africa has also seen some of the continental language it once carried slip from BRICS texts, which is partly why it is revising its approach and why coordination matters for holding African priorities in the grouping's documents.

Insights

These readings cut across the retreat's discussions. They are analytical rather than a record of the discussions, and each is set in the context that gives it weight.

Representation and coordination are still to be built

Africa's presence in BRICS has outpaced its coordination, but the gap is recent rather than chronic. Coordination and representation play out in summits, Sherpa meetings, ministerial tracks and a dense ecosystem of councils and working groups; what is still missing is the practice of using them together. Within the intergovernmental track, much of the substantive work is done by national bureaucracies or coordinated blocs that align before matters reach the full table, and it is precisely this kind of bloc that the three African members have not yet formed.

The pattern recurs across the pillars: the African chapters of several councils have not met to agree on a common line, working groups are announced but seldom convened, and in standing forums the three sit as separate national delegations rather than as a coordinated group. The deficit is partly organisational, the want of a venue and a settled practice, and partly a matter of choice, since a member may see an advantage in engaging separately to keep room to hedge. Any case for coordination, therefore, has to show why it serves each of them and not the continent alone.

Coordination as leverage

Debates about influence in multilateral bodies tend to fix on formal powers such as the veto. A more durable source of influence is the discipline of coordinating in advance. That discipline has lifted the A3 in the UN Security Council, where Africa's three elected members compare positions and, when they align, raise the continent's weight on the Council's African questions.

The A3 are an inspiration for the method rather than a template to copy: they act under an explicit continental mandate, with the African Group and the Committee of Ten providing continuity, whereas the three African members of BRICS hold no such mandate and do not represent the continent. What they can adopt is the practice of comparing notes before positions are tabled and of choosing the matters on which a common line serves their own interests. Their advantage is time. Full membership, which is a more accurate description than 'permanence', allows them to accumulate the institutional memory that effective coordination requires. However, a seat that endures is not the same as coordination that endures, which must be made and maintained. Whether they choose to build it is the question on which much of the rest turns.

A reformist grouping

Outside commentary often portrays BRICS as an anti-Western bloc forming a competing global order, a challenger to the UN, or a platform aimed at creating a common currency to replace the US dollar. However, the group's own record suggests a different interpretation, with member states consistently emphasising that BRICS is not intended as an alternative to the UN and is not pursuing a unified currency. Instead, initiatives such as the use of local currencies in trade are framed as practical measures to enhance development financing and reduce transaction constraints, rather than as a strategy of de-dollarisation – an approach comparable to how the introduction of the euro was not originally framed as an attempt to challenge the dollar.

Its members seek a stronger position within the existing order, a seat at the table and a say over its terms, while reserving the freedom to build additional avenues for cooperation. Part of what makes the platform useful is its capacity to hold together: India and China sit at the same table and reach agreed declarations despite an unresolved border dispute, at a time when other forums have struggled to agree on anything at all.

This matters for African strategy twice over. It sets realistic expectations of what the platform can deliver on contested geopolitics, where consensus among 10 heterogeneous members is hard to reach. And it points to a shared African interest in correcting the external narrative, since the perception that BRICS is a confrontational project narrows the space, at home and abroad, for the practical and developmental cooperation that is within reach.

None of this denies the grievance behind the grouping: the interest in local-currency trade and settlement is, in part, a response to the perceived weaponisation of the dollar and to coercive financial measures. However, that response takes a material and reformist form, diversifying risk and pressing for a fairer say, rather than constructing an alternative system.

A feasibility gradient across the themes

The retreat's three themes sit at different levels of difficulty, and the gradient between them is itself a finding. On economic cooperation, trade, energy and development finance, the interests of the three align closely enough that concrete joint or coordinated initiatives emerged within the discussion, particularly on regional integration, infrastructure, industrialisation and financial cooperation. On global governance and geopolitics, the three share much of the diagnosis on representation, development inequality and the reform of international institutions, while differing in national priorities and approaches. In these areas, the most productive gains are likely to come from sustained consultation, strategic coordination and mutual awareness rather than from rigid common positions. An effective African approach should therefore prioritise practical cooperation where convergence is strongest, while maintaining constructive coordination on the more complex geopolitical questions.

The delivery test

Foreign policy was treated throughout as an extension of domestic priorities, particularly economic delivery and development outcomes. This underscores the importance of the economic and development tracks and encourages close attention to whether engagement can show tangible relevance to citizens: jobs, investment, lower costs or opportunity.

Put concretely, the recurring measures were research collaboration, youth and skills development, support for small enterprises, academic mobility, infrastructure financing and community-level economic opportunity. Immediate material returns do not always determine foreign policy, and BRICS cannot be measured by a simple return test. Yet developmental impact has become an important source of legitimacy for African international engagement, and an agenda that cannot be connected to outcomes on the ground will struggle to hold domestic support, however sound the diplomacy behind it. This also reframes the people-to-people pillar as a measure of relevance rather than a courtesy.

The record and continuity

The record of what the grouping has done is more complete than is often assumed. Each presidency publishes the summit declarations on its website, and the Think Tank Council maintains a public archive that includes past summit deliberations, Council recommendations, working-group documents across the tracks and statements by leaders and foreign ministers. Continuity is also carried by the Sherpa model, through which priorities are largely held over from one chair to the next and adjusted at the margins, as when South Africa added language on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) during its presidency. The difficulty is therefore one of navigation and use rather than of memory: the material is dispersed across many sites and not organised around African priorities, and the three do not yet draw on it together. The opportunity is modest and achievable to build an African-priorities index or layer it on top of the Council's existing archive, maintained across the three think tank communities, rather than to construct a new repository.

The institutionalisation question

BRICS is itself debating how far to institutionalise, a debate better understood as being about predictable action and an orderly handover between chairs than about building a bureaucracy.

Two questions are worth keeping apart: how formal or loose any arrangement should be, and how many bodies and processes the grouping should carry. First, the lightest workable form is the right one for the three African members. The A3 in the UN Security Council coordinate without a secretariat, convening, comparing positions and moving on; the EU coordinates in the G20 the same way. A standing bureaucracy would add costs and travel, and would be unlikely to win member states' support. What coordination does need is clear responsibility, so that convening rotates among the three while a named lead carries each cycle.

Second, the practice of judging each chair by the number of initiatives it launches produces bodies that meet once and then lapse. The more immediate gain for African members lies in making existing structures work and pressing for fewer, bolder ideas to be carried through, rather than adding new ones. Greater formality, wherever it manifests, should protect rather than crowd out the academic, youth, civil and business voices that give the grouping its reach.

Challenges

The retreat identified various obstacles. Each is set out here in terms of its implications for coordination among the three African members.

Who coordinates, and what holds a common line

Two practical questions constrain any attempt to coordinate. The first is who convenes it. No member holds a mandate from the others; several existing structures have proved ineffective; and a fixed lead would sit awkwardly among three sovereign equals. Convening is therefore better arranged on a rotating basis, with the member who proposes the meeting able to chair it. The second is what happens when a member acts outside an agreed line, through a national channel or another structure, thereby leaving a coordinated position exposed. These are design questions that are easier to settle in advance than in the moment.

Divergence on UN Security Council reform

The sharpest divergence, and the one most relevant to BRICS, concerns reform of the UN Security Council. The three converge on the case for change and differ on its form.

A continental position exists in principle in the Ezulwini Consensus, adopted in 2005, which calls for permanent African seats with veto rights alongside additional elected seats. However, it comes with unresolved internal tension over the veto and, two decades on, has not advanced. The harder question is who: which African states would occupy any expanded seats, and whether individual states or the AU would hold them. This is not abstract for BRICS. It surfaced in the grouping in 2025, when the foreign ministers' meeting produced no joint statement for the first time, with reform language among the unresolved points, after the naming of individual aspirants strained the understanding that Africa speaks of two seats without naming countries.

That July, the Rio declaration settled on carefully balanced language: it retained Brazil and India as aspirants, dropped South Africa's name and recorded the support of China and Russia, the grouping's two permanent members of the UN Security Council, for a reformed Council and for the Ezulwini principle that Africa should hold permanent representation. The episode matters for the Sherpa teams precisely because it shows how an unmanaged continental disagreement can block a BRICS outcome. Coordination cannot wish the divergence away, and a credible African approach must engage it directly, without prejudging where reform lands.

Uneven domestic anchoring

The case for BRICS is unevenly made at home. Report-back to research and civil society communities does occur, particularly in host years and through Sherpa engagement with the councils. Still, it is irregular and varies considerably across the three, which weakens accountability and public understanding. The grouping is still widely perceived as an essentially economic project, which narrows the constituency that engages with it, particularly among younger people whose interests extend to digital, technological and governance questions; the youth perspective is barely visible in the grouping's declarations.

The political space for academic, youth and civil society participation also differs markedly among members, which constrains the people-to-people ambition in practice. The ultimate purpose of BRICS should be to improve the lives of ordinary citizens by addressing challenges such as unemployment, poverty, inequality and limited access to opportunities. Thin civil-society engagement, broadly defined, weakens the legitimacy of the grouping, especially in its democracies, and a stronger domestic constituency would in turn strengthen the case for the three to coordinate as a bloc. The people-to-people pillar is a foundational element that should inform broader political and economic engagements.

Structural limits on the economic agenda

The economic openings are genuine yet constrained. Intra-African trade remains at around 15% of the continent's total, held back by infrastructure gaps, non-tariff barriers, financing constraints and misaligned incentives to trade with neighbours. Many economies retain an import structure weighted towards raw materials, food and pharmaceuticals, with exports that competitors can readily substitute. Much of the most valuable economic cooperation occurs with partners beyond the continent, leaving those partners to set the terms. Beyond market access, the room available to African economies narrows due to intellectual property regimes, sovereign debt burdens, illicit financial flows, and international tax rules. The three African members, therefore, face a double task:

- to elevate continental priorities such as intra-African trade, value chains, development finance and a fairer treatment of these structural constraints within the economic and financial pillar; and
- to guard against reproducing extractive or asymmetrical relationships with the larger BRICS economies.

Fragmentation and external leverage

Africa's collective weight – its 54 UN votes and its resource endowment – is influential only when coordinated, and it rarely is. Continental institutions are chronically under-resourced, which limits their capacity to coordinate or offer member states an alternative to bilateral deals. External powers court individual African states and back different candidates for the same prizes, deepening the fragmentation that blunts the continent's leverage. The realistic implication is that the grouping's broad geopolitical direction is largely set by its founding powers, which places a premium on African members acting together if they are to shape it at all.

Avenues for action

These avenues are offered as ways of thinking about coordination rather than as instructions to three sovereign processes. They are most developed where the discussion pointed to workable steps, and more open where judgment properly rests with the teams. It helps to separate what is achievable before New Delhi from what takes longer to build. The immediate steps are a single pre-summit consultation among the three to compare priorities and settle two or three thematic areas for coordination; a short joint analytical input on those areas through the think tank and academic tracks; and one concrete economic step to test the approach. The standing arrangement described below is a multi-year build and should not crowd out the smaller steps available now.

The central move: A light, standing coordination practice

The clearest and most widely supported proposition of the retreat was that South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia deliberately coordinate their engagement in BRICS rather than act in parallel. The reference point is the A3 in the UN Security Council, whose members align before matters reach the full council. The three would draw on that method rather than reproduce the arrangement, since they hold no continental mandate and do not speak for Africa. They would coordinate to strengthen their own hand, aligning on a common position where it serves their interests and leaving the rest to national channels. Coordination of this kind is not standard practice in other regions of the grouping, and the proposition is therefore offered as a new, value-adding methodology rather than as a norm to be matched. On matters where the three already want similar outcomes, acting together multiplies leverage and creates efficiency in open negotiations at little cost to flexibility.

Drawing on the discussion, such an arrangement might take the following shape. It should be consultative rather than heavily formalised and should work through what already exists.

- **Two connected levels.** An official level at the Sherpa and ministerial track, described in the discussion as an informal African BRICS coordination platform, and a second level across the people-to-people and economic pillars, coordinated through the five councils, namely the Think Tank Council, the Business Council, the Civil BRICS Council, the Youth Council and the Women's Business Alliance. Coordination is needed across these structures rather than in a single body, and the arrangement should connect to the Think Tank Council and the Academic Forum rather than duplicate them.
- **A pre-summit rhythm.** The first task is pre-alignment: a standing point of consultation ahead of ministerial meetings, the council processes and the annual summit, at which the three compare priorities and agree where they will move jointly, where they will coordinate quietly and how they will keep one another informed. The discipline is to coordinate before positions are tabled, not after.
- **A deliberately narrow remit.** Consensus on every question is neither necessary nor the aim, and the fewer the matters carried jointly, the more likely agreement becomes. The arrangement concentrates joint effort where African interests converge and leaves the rest to national channels. It coordinates the three entering the room rather than forcing the wider grouping into a common line, which preserves the agree-to-disagree character that the newer members value.
- **Rotating convenership.** No single capital needs to host the arrangement. Conventionship can rotate among the three by year or summit cycle, or pass to whichever member is closest to the relevant chair. A named lead carries each cycle so that responsibility is clear, which keeps ownership shared and avoids any impression that one country speaks for the others.
- **A shared coordination function and a co-anchored record.** A light, shared coordinating team can support the three, drawing on the leads of the relevant councils rather than being housed in a single institution. The record of African priorities and their progress can be co-anchored across the three think tank communities. South Africa's longer tenure is most useful here as knowledge transfer to the other two on hosting, chairing and process, rather than as a standing chair.

The risks deserve to be weighed, because doing so strengthens the case. A visible bloc may invite counter-coordination or push the unresolved divergence over UN Security Council seats into public view, where it is harder to manage than in private. A shared arrangement can also be captured by its strongest member, which is why convenership rotates and the coordination function is shared. In addition, it can raise expectations it cannot meet, which is why it is better to start narrow, prove the approach on a few matters and grow only what works.

Concentrate first on the economic and developmental areas

These are the areas where joint or coordinated positioning is realistic and where the discussion produced the most concrete openings. Three economic priorities stand out, all of which can be anchored in commitments the three have already made in Agenda 2063 and the SDGs and furthered through the renewal of the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership to 2030.

Industrialisation and value addition. The three share an interest in moving from raw extraction towards value-added production, and in resisting framings that cast the continent only as a supplier of inputs. The discussion pointed to a sequential, flying-geese approach. Each country identifies its leading sectors and builds industrial clusters in areas such as pharmaceuticals and agro-processing, with the members then trading and investing on that basis. This means capability spreads across the continent rather than concentrating in one place.

The constraint is less about the acquisition of technology than about the transfer of practical know-how, and investment terms can be used to require genuine technology and skills transfer rather than their promise. India's framing of its position as chair around supply chains, rather than value chains, is worth engaging with directly.

The limits are well understood: intra-African trade sits at around 15%, held back by capacity, finance and incentives more than by demand. The deepest value chains run partly through partners beyond the continent. Language and cultural exchange, raised as a practical enabler, would lower a barrier that repeatedly frustrates commercial engagement with the larger members.

A just energy transition and critical minerals. There is common ground on a coordinated approach to the energy transition. However, the three should first agree on what a just transition means for African economies, since the term is used differently across the grouping. Concrete possibilities include a trilateral working group on a just energy transition, joint positioning on green hydrogen and renewable value chains and a shared approach to processing critical minerals so that more value stays on the continent. Much of this is, in substance, a negotiation with the grouping's renewable-energy and manufacturing powerhouses – like Brazil, China and India – which is why it is better consolidated through the three than pursued in separate bilateral tracks.

A practical first step is to assemble a shared portfolio of bankable projects, assessed against each country's strengths, and to take it to the NDB together. Existing work on country platforms and frameworks, such as the African Green Minerals Strategy, offers a foundation. The shared agenda should concentrate on areas where the three plainly converge, such as solar, wind, battery storage, green hydrogen, geothermal energy and mineral beneficiation, with nuclear power a growing area of BRICS-related interest for South Africa and Egypt. Bilaterally sensitive questions, including those touching shared river systems, are better left to their own channels.

Finance, payments and development finance. Settling more trade in local currencies is a matter of risk management and of freeing resources for development, protecting against currency and interest-rate volatility and lowering transaction costs, rather than a campaign against the dollar. An estimate by the AfCFTA Secretariat puts the potential continental savings at around \$5 billion a year.

The work to build on is already underway, in the continental Pan-African Payment and Settlement System and in the grouping's own cross-border payments initiative, BRICS Pay. A pilot linking the three countries' national payment switches, with technical support available within the grouping, including from India and China, is a workable first step. Another is using such systems to bring informal cross-border trade into the formal economy; the place of central-bank digital currencies in cross-border settlement is an emerging question worth tracking. On development finance, the NDB lends to its members and offers local-currency lending. Egypt and South Africa are members, while Ethiopia is in the process of joining, which makes a shared African view on the bank's priorities worth developing.

The preparation of bankable, strategically framed projects is as important as the scale of finance available: finance has been raised for complex cross-border projects, including in partnership with the African Export-Import Bank, when the project was well structured. Useful asks, therefore, include:

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| <p>1 Scaling up development finance through the bank</p> | <p>2 Operationalising the Contingent Reserve Arrangement as a liquidity facility</p> |
| <p>3 Ensuring a stronger regional presence to appraise projects against local conditions</p> | <p>4 Supplying the research input the bank is seeking, which opens a direct channel for the think tank and academic communities</p> |

Coordinate the method in the contested areas

On global governance reform and geopolitics, the three share much of the diagnosis but differ on the solution, so their contribution is a common method rather than a common position. The divergence over UN Security Council seats, set out among the challenges, is the clearest instance.

The method that follows is to coordinate where interests align, to engage differences openly rather than avoid them and to guard against the fragmentation that deepens when external powers back different African candidates for the same prizes. On peace and security, the emphasis should fall on African agency: a better-financed and more effective AU and its security architecture, with BRICS used for dialogue and information-sharing rather than being pressed into a security role it was not built to carry out. On UN Security Council reform itself, the African members are well placed to support a continental conversation that is still underway, without prejudging its outcome or presenting any single pathway as a settled African position.

Build domestic constituencies, people-to-people tracks and memory

A stronger foundation at home would make coordination both more legitimate and more durable. The youth track invites early attention. Unlike the expert-, business- and civil-society-led councils, it has, in several countries, been led by the government and has struggled to function; the South African chapter, for instance, has rarely convened since its establishment. Bringing it closer to the other councils' model would help, and the three could carry one or two youth-perspective recommendations into the New Delhi tracks, given how little the youth dimension is featured in the grouping's declarations.

The Women's Business Alliance deserves comparable attention, given the importance of women-led enterprise and small and medium-sized firms in African economies.

Community-facing initiatives would tie the agenda to the delivery test and widen the constituency: a BRICS-Africa start-up challenge and digital-skills and entrepreneurship programmes aimed at youth and women, drawing on the grouping's work on the new industrial revolution and its knowledge-hub initiatives, are concrete and achievable.

Two further measures would help. A domestic feedback loop, in which each foreign ministry reports once a year on how it has engaged with BRICS and domesticated the agenda, would let research and civil society communities build on prior work rather than start anew. In addition, a bottom-up channel for grassroots organisations to feed in at the national and regional levels would balance a governance culture that tends to be top-down.

And because the newer members have joined a process the founding member has worked at for over a decade, deliberate capacity building and knowledge transfer, including on hosting and chairing, would help the three operate on a common footing. This was a recurring theme and applies to people-to-people exchange and cultural cooperation as much as to official processes.

Act through existing channels, including beyond government

Not all of this depends on governments. The Think Tank Council and the Academic Forum are ready channels for pre-alignment and shared analysis. Pre-alignment meetings among the three could be taken up as an activity of the Think Tank Council itself. The NDB's appetite for research is an entry point for the analytical community, and the youth, civil and women's tracks reach the constituencies on which domestic support rests. As the grouping institutionalises, these tracks have a direct interest in protecting the space they occupy. A concrete handle is to press, through the councils, for independent voices to be included in the design of any new structures, so that openness becomes a standing feature rather than a favour granted to each chair. The councils can also serve as focal points for explaining to the wider public how to take part in the BRICS process.

What this means for each constituency

The avenues above land differently for the different parts of the BRICS community, and each has a concrete first step.

Sherpa teams and national policymakers

Can convene the pre-summit consultation, press shared commitments under Agenda 2063 and the SDGs into ministerial language and help shape the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership to 2030. For South Africa, this can feed directly into the cabinet submission due this year.

The Think Tank Council and the Academic Forum

Can host the pre-alignment meetings as a standing activity, produce the short joint analytical inputs, build the African-priorities layer on the Council's archive and supply the research the NDB is seeking.

The Business Council

Can take forward joint positioning on value chains, the sequential industrial approach and the preparation of bankable projects for the NDB.

The Women's Business Alliance

Can carry the agenda on women-led enterprise and small and medium-sized firms, which the discussion judged as under-weighted relative to the business track.

The Youth Council

Can press one or two youth-specific asks for New Delhi and anchor the digital-skills and start-up initiatives, drawing on the grouping's work on the new industrial revolution.

The Civil BRICS

Can anchor the domestic feedback loop and the bottom-up channel that connect the agenda to citizens.

Strategic considerations for ongoing attention

The retreat left several questions open, and naming them is more useful than glossing over them. Each is, in part, work that a standing arrangement would take up.

The lightest workable form

If a standing point of consultation is the enabling move, what is its lightest workable form? Who convenes it, at what level and how often, and how does it relate to existing structures such as the Think Tank Council without adding to proliferation?

Connecting the three to the wider African stake

The three full members are not mandated to speak for the continent, and the partner states and AU form part of the broader African presence in BRICS. How should the three relate their coordination to the partner tier and to continental frameworks, so that an African voice is credible rather than self-appointed?

The under-explored areas

Climate, the governance of critical minerals, digital and AI cooperation, including data and digital public infrastructure, and the growing place of nuclear energy were only lightly touched on. Yet each aligns with the New Delhi agenda. What would a coordinated African position on these look like, and who would develop it?

An action plan and a way to track it

The three would benefit from short-, medium- and long-term action plans, with a light monitoring approach and a small set of indicators, so that progress on the shared agenda can be tracked and the arrangement held to its stated purpose.

Conclusion



Africa's position in BRICS is now substantial, and the external moment makes coordination more valuable than at any time since enlargement. The analysis points to a sequence. Before New Delhi, take the small, achievable steps: a pre-summit consultation, a joint analytical input and one practical economic step to test the approach. Over time, build a light, standing arrangement that draws on the UN Security Council's A3 method, while remembering that the three coordinate among themselves and do not speak for the continent. Concentrate first where coordination is achievable – on economic and developmental areas – and coordinate methods rather than force positions on the contested questions of reform and geopolitics, and enhance more inclusive participation across all pillars.

Representation has been secured. Whether it becomes influential depends on whether the three choose to act together, with the continuity and delivery that can turn a seat at the table into a say in the outcome. Meaningful progress depends not only on formal mechanisms but also on sustained dialogue, capacity building, knowledge sharing and collaborative action among all pillars.

Cover image: Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, BRICS Summit, Kazan, Russia, October 23, 2024, Shutterstock

