

South Africa wants to join BRIC

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[I]f and when South Africa joins BRIC (and there is no reason to believe the prospect is unreal), the new grouping (whether it will be called BRICSA or SABRIC) will acquire a really global character representing all major continents.

On Tuesday South African President Jacob Zuma, while on a state visit to China, expressed the desire and willingness of his country to join the informal club of four developing nations, namely Brazil, Russia, India and China, known as BRIC.

This statement made by the South African leader clearly demonstrates the growing global interest towards this informal grouping which until very recently was basically disregarded both by world policy makers and political scientists.

The very term BRIC was coined by Goldman Sachs' economist Jim O'Neill as early as 2001 and ever since has been used to define the four rapidly rising economies of the world which by 2050 would surpass the total economic potential of G7 countries and become the most dominant economies in the world. Some economists even predict that this could happen even much earlier than the initially outlined date.

Although the theses of Goldman Sachs' experts concerning the purely economic aspects of the four nations' development have never been seriously questioned, another question for quite a long time remained much vaguer: is there anything, apart from similarities in the course of economic development, which can bring the four together?

From a political point of view the answer seemed to be "no".

First, geographically speaking, Brazil is too distant from the other three to have much common interest with them.

But even if we look upon the three regionally close powers, we must state that there are too many contradictions that hardly help them form a strategic alliance. The idea of a strategic triangle 'Moscow - New Delhi - Beijing' was first put forward by the then Russian Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov in December, 1998. But this idea was never realized, and one of the reasons that it was actually still-born was the old rivalry between China and India for regional supremacy, as well as some old unresolved border issues between the two countries.

So, even little more than a year ago, for many observers the concept of bringing together the four major developing nations seemed unrealizable. A famous Russian public intellectual and member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation Vyacheslav Glazychev wrote in February 2009, 'BRIC is an intellectual phantom.' And this view was shared by many

observers.

But time has shown that skeptics were far from being right. Despite all difficulties, BRIC has turned into an effectively working body, even if it has not been institutionalized. BRIC summits have become annual. All four countries belong to the G20 group which, in many aspects, have started to play even a greater role than the G7 in formulating the global principles of coping with the challenges the world is facing.

Yes, all four countries, like the rest of the world, were hit hard by the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and the rate of economic growth slowed down. But, as many economists point out, the negative impact on the developing economies was much lesser than the one suffered by developed nations of Western Europe and North America.

The South African President's statement made in Beijing shows that BRIC's role is not limited to the economy, and the phenomenon may well surpass the G7 group not only in purely economic terms, but in politics as well. Before coming to China Jacob Zuma within a short period of time had made visits to the other three BRIC countries, and therefore his optimism concerning South Africa's future membership in the group is well founded.

"We think that the BRIC expresses a very important grouping in a changing world today", said Jacob Zuma, and also mentioned that there is currently no African member in BRIC. South Africa's "participation in BRIC would mean that an entire continent that has a population of over 1 billion people is represented," he said.

So, if and when South Africa joins BRIC (and there is no reason to believe the prospect is unreal), the new grouping (whether it will be called BRICSA or SABRIC) will acquire a really global character representing all major continents.

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