

# Ethiopia's Membership in BRICS: Opportunities and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Ethiopia's joining of BRICS in January 2024, providing an explanation on how this accession can lead to an expansion of development opportunities for the nation and elevates the global position and diplomacy of the country. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach consisting of document analysis, comparative analysis, and content analysis within the timeframe January-June 2024, the article assesses alignment between the objectives of Ethiopia and the joint objective of BRICS in areas of infrastructure, agriculture, industry, trade, and security.

The major conclusions drawn from this article are that: the sentiment of Ethiopian media on Ethiopia joining the BRICS is predominantly positive at 80%; nevertheless, there is an evident trade imbalance, whereby the contribution of BRICS member nations to Ethiopia's imports stands at 34.29%, while their contribution to Ethiopia's exports stands at 7.65%. There are also specific benefits driving Ethiopia's accession include New Development Bank financing, infrastructure modernization, and technology transfer to the agricultural and energy sector.

The article highlights the economic benefits associated with increased market access, investments, technology transfer, and the establishment of financial instruments led by BRICS nations, while at the same time analysing issues such as geopolitics, governance constraints, institutional capacity gaps, and macroeconomic vulnerabilities. The article ends with specific policy recommendations that can assist Ethiopia in harnessing the full potential of BRICS and fostering south-south collaboration.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, BRICS, Africa, Multipolarity, Economic development, South-South cooperation

## INTRODUCTION

BRICS, originally considered to be a "club of emerging economies", is now considered a wider platform to represent the interests of the Global South due to the addition of new member states in 2023–2024. The addition of Ethiopia and the newly inducted Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as members of BRICS demonstrates the growing importance of African states within the newly developed multipolar system. Ethiopia's accession to BRICS holds great importance since Ethiopia is the second largest populous country in Africa and is recovering from conflict, implementing an ambitious development plan, and continues to become a regional leader.

Ethiopia received its official invitation into BRICS on August 24, 2023 during the Johannesburg Summit and its membership became effective on January 2024 with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Argentina (Argentina subsequently declined its invitation) [6, p. 45; 7]. Thus the expansion represents the change in the BRICS organization whereas the traditional organization can be viewed as a group of emerging economies, is now becoming a representative of what some scholars would call as the "world majority" (term used to denote a coalition of countries that are currently advocating to have a larger voice in global governance that is traditionally dominated by Western countries) [9, p. 41].

Originally founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa in the early 2000s, the BRICS grouping represents some of the largest developing economies in the world. Collectively they make up over 40 per cent of the world's population and provide a large share of global GDP. As a group the BRICS states have a total

economic output of over USD 28 trillion (approximately 28 per cent of the global economy) and therefore they have a lot of power within the international political arena. Furthermore, with the addition of four more member states Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, the BRICS' political and economic power will only be increased. Becoming part of this type of coalition could provide a number of benefits to Ethiopia.

In addition to capital and technology, joining the BRICS would help give Ethiopia a broader platform for diplomacy and allow the views of African and Middle Eastern leaders to have a greater impact on international affairs. The institutions linked to BRICS will aid this effort. The New Development Bank (NDB), with authorized and subscription capital of up to US\$100 billion, along with the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which provides a further US\$100 billion of liquidity to BRICS member states, provide significant alternatives to the traditional, western-based financial systems [6; 2, p. 112]. In addition, BRICS members are increasingly supporting trade in local currency; thus, supporting the reduction of BRICS member states' dependency on US dollars.

While BRICS has lofty goals, experts point out that BRICS does not yet have the ability to act as a complete alternative to the present system of global governance. Analysts have labelled BRICS as a "supplementary" pole; it attempts to improve the bargaining power of BRICS members in the IMF, World Bank, and WTO [2:118; 7:56]. Many African nations are also trying to engage with BRICS to achieve "re-sovereignization," according to Degtarev [3:35]; meaning they want to diversify their international partnerships to decrease the dependence on traditional donor/recipient relationships and the vulnerabilities that go with them.

When it comes to the expansion of BRICS, there are two primary opinions in the academic discussion. Kirton and Larionova [2] view BRICS as an innovative form of "inclusive multilateralism" that can challenge the West by providing new governance methods and financial options. On the other hand, Suslov and Bordachev [5] view BRICS as the institutional core of a "world majority" coalition that is pursuing a counter-hegemonic agenda. These two perspectives on BRICS are not incompatible from Ethiopia's perspective; BRICS provides both a symbol of an inclusive international system and a tool for promoting development through South-South cooperation.

The article focuses on how Ethiopia's new position in BRICS affects the dynamics of interaction between a developing African country that is not a BRICS member, and the three other African members of the BRICS group.

The two main research questions it attempts to address are: 1) what are the opportunities and challenges for Ethiopia that result from being a member of BRICS compared to the other Africans connected to BRICS; and, 2) does Ethiopia's domestic situation dictate how it interacts with the other members of BRICS.

Recent literature has explored how Africa interacts with BRICS in general [8; 3] but, few have looked specifically at how Ethiopia fits into these patterns. This paper seeks to fill that void by placing Ethiopia's membership into a comparative perspective with its fellow African member states in BRICS, and then to look at how its development-security relationship shapes its interaction with BRICS.

## METHODS

A mixed-methods approach was found useful for this research and incorporates document analysis, comparative analysis and content analysis to achieve the aim of the study.

Document analysis involved the analysis of key national strategies and documents of Ethiopia such as the National Security Policy of 2002 and the 2020 Home-Grown Economic Reform Agenda along with summit declarations from BRICS (2019-2024) and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Comparative analysis involved comparing Ethiopia's policy priorities and the indicators used to assess such priorities with BRICS policy priorities using documents of South Africa and Nigeria; compared to both South Africa's Foreign Policy White Papers, and Uganda's Vision of 2040 in order to identify varying levels/starting points of potential engagement with BRICS.

While South Africa is the sole African BRICS country aside from Egypt that was considered for comparison purposes due to its relatively recent admission into the BRICS, Nigeria (one of Africa's largest economy and a BRICS partner) and Uganda (Country in East Africa and also BRICS partner) were also considered in order to determine different starting points for engaging with BRICS. Due to data availability for the January to June 2024 period, detailed comparative findings are presented primarily for South Africa, with Nigeria and Uganda referenced illustratively.

Content analysis involved a purposive sample of 50 articles authored during the period January to June 2024 from three major Ethiopian Media Outlets (Fana Broadcasting Corporation (Now Fana media corporation); Addis Zemen; and The Reporter) which were identified using the search term BRICS Ethiopia; coding used thematic frames such as (a) Economic Opportunity/(b) Geopolitical Risk; in addition to coding: Statements made by Ethiopian officials at BRICS Meetings/Forums.

The article is concentrated on the first 6 months after Ethiopian official inclusion into BRICS, specifically between January-June 2024 and therefore cannot have a definitive analysis of long-term outcomes from membership, however initial narratives have considerable value as they can influence public expectations and will likely affect the way BRICS members establish priorities for projects based upon BRICS structure [10].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethiopia has expressed its intention to join BRICS because its membership would help meet many of the government's broader national development plans. Ethiopia's Home-Grown Economic Reform Agenda, which was published in 2020, includes industrial manufacturing as a priority and outlines plans for modernizing the agricultural sector and investing in large infrastructure development. In addition, these are also priorities for many of the BRICS countries, many of which have already made significant investments in Ethiopia. For instance, China has made significant investments in Ethiopia's industrial parks and has helped to develop many of the manufacturing facilities located in these parks. India has also made investments to support the transfer of technology to Ethiopian farmers to help them modernize the agricultural sector.

Trade with BRICS countries is important to Ethiopia. In 2022 to 2023 fiscal year, 34.29% of Ethiopia's total imports were sourced from BRICS member countries; China (21.11% of all imports) and India (11.3% of all imports) represented the two largest suppliers of goods to Ethiopia.

Compared to other African countries that are currently connected with BRICS, Ethiopia has a unique economic situation. For example, South Africa has a high level of deindustrialization and declining manufacturing output. Conversely, Ethiopia has the potential to become a major manufacturing economy in the future due to its relatively young population, substantial ongoing investment in industrial parks and improved logistical corridors, and a strategic location on or near the primary trade routes from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. However, in order for Ethiopia to achieve its economic potential, it must develop its energy resources, and address existing logistical challenges, as well as improve its governance structures [11; 12].

Ethiopia's policy framework places significant emphasis on how development relates to security. The National Security Policy of 2002 states that poverty, underdevelopment, and weak governance are the biggest threats to Ethiopia's security and that most external threats originate from these vulnerabilities [13]. This aspect of Ethiopia's policy framework closely relates to the changing security agenda of BRICS and to increasing concern for matters such as food security, energy stability, technological access, and economic resiliency.

Consequently, Ethiopia's foreign policy can be described as being "multi-comprehensive." In its role as the host country for the African Union's headquarters, it aims to play a leadership role in Africa while also developing ties with BRICS. At the same time, Ethiopia is working to build stronger relationships with Western countries, including the European Union and the United States. This strategy is not an entirely new geopolitical orientation; it is a diplomatic initiative to balance its diplomatic relationships with other countries, thus providing its policy flexibility and reducing its dependence on any one partner. [15; 16].

For Ethiopia to convert BRICS membership into tangible development outcomes, it is important that the country to tackle the issues of governance and the dangers associated with infrastructure procurement. This can be

achieved through four concrete actions. The first one entails the establishment of BRICS project preparatory units in the Ministry of Finance and the Policy Studies Institute to filter and identify New Development Bank funded projects. The second action involves the implementation of internationally benchmarked procurement policies in all projects funded by BRICS. The third action would involve the need for monitoring and evaluating all infrastructure projects worth more than \$50 million on a quarterly basis. Finally, it is imperative that Ethiopia negotiate local content terms in all the loans from BRICS. Without these actions, the risk of cost overruns, corruption, and political arguments will undermine the development gains that BRICS membership promises.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis of Ethiopian media indicates a positive portrayal of Ethiopia's BRICS membership, as approximately 80% of articles view membership as a chance for both economic opportunity and infrastructure investment. A minority of only 20% represent potential geopolitical risks tied to membership. Thus, we can conclude that there is a significant amount of support within Ethiopia for the government's pursuit of BRICS status.

However, Ethiopia still has many structural challenges to overcome, including lack of infrastructure, shortage of skilled workers, and regulatory impediments, which may prevent the country from realizing all the benefits associated with BRICS membership. Nevertheless, comments from Ethiopia's regional neighbors are generally supportive and highlight the opportunity for new investment, broadened markets for exports, and increased visibility of Ethiopian diplomacy [12;17;16].

### **Opportunities of BRICS Membership**

Development financing would likely be the most immediate potential benefit of the NDB[8]. Ethiopia has struggled with poverty and underdevelopment for many years, and several infrastructure projects financed through the NDB could address these issues. Some projects that will be funded by the NDB include the modernization of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and the development of renewable energy parks.

The Ethiopian government has not yet received any loans from the NDB; however, it has expressed an interest in joining the NDB and aligning major infrastructure projects to its priority list[18; 19]. If Ethiopia were to become a member, it would have access to larger amounts of loans, potentially in currencies other than US dollars, and more flexible terms than loans from traditional Bretton Woods institutions.

There is also an opportunity for agricultural modernization in Ethiopia. Brazil could contribute its expertise in agribusiness, India could provide digital agricultural technology, and China could provide agricultural processing equipment, all of which together would increase productivity in an industry that has historically been important to the national economy of Ethiopia[8].

The industrial development of Ethiopia is another area of possible cooperation. For example, Ethiopian companies could benefit from China's experience with manufacturing, while at the same time; they could take advantage of Ethiopia's relatively low costs for labor to build textile and light manufacturing industries. Another example is how Russian nuclear technology included in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in 2023 might be used for the peaceful application of nuclear energy in such areas as infrastructure, medicine and agriculture.

In addition to the possibilities for bilateral cooperation, the BRICS countries represent a broader framework for the coordination of industrial strategies and strengthening of regional value chains in sectors such as textiles, agro-processing and pharmaceuticals [9; 20]. Furthermore, technology transfer from more developed BRICS economies will help improve new technical skills and increasing productivity in Ethiopia.

Longer-term efforts to establish a BRICS parliamentary forum will help increase coordination in UN voting which could result in increasing Ethiopia's voice in global issues such as climate finance, migration and peacekeeping mandates [2; 21].

There is also the potential for expanding security cooperation by providing access to satellite data, intelligence sharing and training for peacekeeping operations. Currently, most BRICS countries have stressed a broader view

of security, including economic stability, health security, as well as food and energy security; all of which are closely associated with Ethiopia's own view of the concept of developmental security [22; 4]

### **Challenges of BRICS Membership**

While Ethiopia has the potential benefit from deeper engagement with BRICS, there are several challenges that will arise as a result. One of the immediate issues that Ethiopia may face will be how it interacts with Western partners, as being part of BRICS does not mean Ethiopia will get sanctioned or lose aid but may create a perception of Ethiopia having aligned further away from a Western geopolitical framework. This alignment will likely impact donor judgment on investment risks, market perceptions, and trade preferences.

Another challenge that may complicate cooperation for Ethiopia is the internal dynamics within BRICS itself. For example, competition between China and India could have a significant impact on how infrastructure procurement and technology standards are established. When new initiatives compete with one another and to the degree that they may agree on de-dollarization there may tend to be an overlapping system of laws through which Ethiopia must try to coordinate [24].

Ethiopia is likely to experience significant challenges related to governing large-scale infrastructure projects, which typically experience bureaucratic delays, cost overruns, and risks associated with corruption. Research of Belt and Road investments as well as other mega-projects has highlighted the importance of having quality regulatory frameworks and transparent procurement systems in order to produce good outcomes for those projects [25].

Ethiopia has ongoing problems with their internal politics and the country is still trying to figure out how to put together a peace process after the civil war; therefore, any large externally financed projects will get made into political arguments.

There is also a structural problem within BRICS nations about the amount of their imports that go to domestic versus international markets. Over 34 percent of Ethiopia's total imports are from BRICS nations but only 7.65 percent of their exports go to BRICS nations [20, 8, 21].

### **CONCLUSION**

Ethiopia joining BRICS is a major milestone that opens up the opportunity to rapidly advance Ethiopia's development and global diplomatic influence while creating new international partnerships. At the same time, BRICS membership will create a number of complex challenges that must be managed carefully.

Ethiopia's unique approach to linking national and international development to national security (through a multi-comprehensive foreign policy) may allow it to benefit from participating in BRICS more than other African countries; however, the final outcome of Ethiopia's BRICS participation will be primarily determined by the capacity of its domestic governance structures rather than by external geopolitical forces.

To provide the best opportunities for success regarding BRICS participation, strengthening project preparation units, improving monitoring of BRICS projects and enhancing the negotiation skill of Ethiopian negotiators will be crucial to ensuring that loan agreements, local content requirements, and environmental standards are in alignment with Ethiopia's long-term development priorities. [20; 10]

Future research should look into implementing BRICS-funded projects, changing trade patterns, and examining how Ethiopia's membership may affect the entire Horn of Africa. Additionally, understanding the relationship between Ethiopia joining BRICS and its membership in the African Union, IGAD, and the African Continental Free Trade Area would improve our knowledge about regional integration in Africa [14; 3].

Finally, as BRICS continues to develop, Ethiopia could provide useful experience for other developing countries as they attempt to navigate a growingly complex and polycentric world.

**Conflict of Interest.** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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