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South Africa must elevate BRICS's economic ambition

- The *Business Day*, on January 9, 2026, led with a [bold headline](#), highlighting South Africa's trade deficit with BRICS partners. Amongst other things, it stated that: "The trade deficit between South Africa and its BRICS partners has grown by \$9.6bn. The news organisation further noted that such a trade deficit: "... calls into question the nature of the country's continued participation in the bloc it joined in 2010."
- I won't go into too much detail about all this, but I want to make a few points. **First**, the BRICS grouping has indeed provided limited economic benefit to South Africa. The exception is China, with which South Africa has deeper trade relations, though more could be done in agriculture and other sectors of our economy if we had a free trade agreement. However, the path forward for this challenge is not necessarily to abandon the BRICS bloc, but to elevate its economic ambitions.
- **Second**, BRICS remains a loose, informal grouping with no sound economic or trade approach that keeps the countries together. This is what we should be focusing on, instead of attempting to dismiss the grouping and view it as hopeless. Due to the lack of a formal trade arrangement, the BRICS countries tend to trade more with countries outside the group. We see higher tariffs remaining on various products within the BRICS. In fact, when one considers intra-BRICS trade, it quickly becomes clear that little is happening within the grouping beyond political matters, with China again being an exception for many countries on trade.
- The constraining factor, as a result of the lack of a BRICS free trade agreement, is the observation, made by the *Business Day* and others before, that exports and investment in this region are low. Thus, questioning South Africa's continuous involvement. Indeed, much of South Africa's economic relationships and investments are with the Western world. But let us be frank, South Africa doesn't have the luxury of choosing either-or in trade matters. We need friendships across the world.
- **Lastly**, as South Africa, our approach to trade should be to balance and retain our existing trading partners in Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world, while simultaneously pushing for an ambitious trade agreement within BRICS and exploring ways to attract investment. Our focus should be on bettering South Africa by skilfully navigating the complex geoeconomic environment of the day.

- In essence, we should (economically at least) reach out to and be friends with all who want to do business with us. India, by the way, is likely to be a global growth engine for the next two decades or so as its per capita GDP catches up. So, deepening trade is key to long-term progress. In today's environment of rising geopolitical tensions and trade friction, this may be the better path of navigating the complexities: more friendships. Other BRICS countries also need to buy into this story of elevating the groupings' economic ambition. This is key for the long-term sustainability of BRICS.