

The Current Status, Challenges, and Strategies of BRICS Think Tank Cooperation: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tank cooperation serves as a catalyst for BRICS cooperation, and the increasingly sophisticated BRICS cooperation mechanism poses new requirements for think tank cooperation among BRICS countries. [Methods/Process] This paper examines the positive role of think tank cooperation in advancing the BRICS cooperation mechanism, summarizes the numerous challenges faced by think tank cooperation due to multiple internal and external factors, and seeks to promote further cooperation among BRICS think tanks. [Results/Conclusion] Member countries should adopt the following targeted measures to address these challenges: establish specialized think tanks with distinctive features, build a shared think tank network, and strengthen advisory and research capacities; leverage synergistic cooperation effects, amplify collective voice through complementary advantages, and enhance discourse-shaping capabilities; advocate for independent and autonomous research, stimulate the vitality of social think tanks, and improve independent operational capacities.

Full Text

Current Situation, Dilemmas, and Strategies of BRICS Think Tank Cooperation

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tank cooperation serves as a booster for BRICS cooperation, and the increasingly sophisticated BRICS cooperation mechanism has proposed new requirements for think tank collaboration among member states. [Method/Process] This paper reviews the positive role of think tank cooperation in advancing the BRICS cooperation mechanism, summarizes the

multiple internal and external challenges confronting such cooperation, and explores pathways to further promote collaboration among BRICS think tanks. **[Result/Conclusion]** Member states should adopt targeted measures to address these shortcomings: building professional and characteristic think tanks, constructing shared think tank networks, and strengthening consulting and research capabilities; leveraging synergistic cooperation effects and complementary advantages to amplify collective voice and enhance discourse-shaping capacity; and advocating independent research while stimulating the vitality of social think tanks to improve overall operational independence.

Keywords: BRICS; think tank cooperation; think tank development

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The BRICS cooperation mechanism has completed its first decade, evolving from an international political and economic dialogue forum among major emerging economies into a comprehensive, institutionalized cooperation platform. This increasingly sophisticated mechanism has imposed new demands on think tank cooperation, yet recent years have witnessed such cooperation constrained by practical dilemmas. How to further advance BRICS think tank cooperation to better serve the deepening and innovation of the BRICS mechanism represents an urgent and important issue that requires resolution.

1 Think Tank Cooperation as a Booster for BRICS Cooperation

The domains of BRICS think tank cooperation have generally expanded in tandem with the broader cooperation agenda. Whether through organizing academic forums to submit outcomes and proposals to leaders' summits or establishing think tank councils to coordinate BRICS research across member states, think tank cooperation has consistently played an active role in propelling the BRICS cooperation mechanism forward.

1.1 Expanding Cooperation Areas in BRICS

From the inaugural "BRIC" leaders' meeting in Yekaterinburg, Russia in June 2009 to the Xiamen, China summit in September 2017, the BRICS cooperation areas have continuously expanded alongside the maturation of the cooperation mechanism. Building upon traditional domains such as international diplomacy, national security, international economics, energy resources, international development, environment, science and technology, and education, the BRICS countries have gradually added four emerging areas: society, health, domestic economy, and cultural exchange. The cooperation scope has thus expanded from initial fiscal and monetary domains to non-economic fields like technological innovation and people-to-people exchanges (see Table 1). Since the founding of "BRIC," the think tank symposium and academic forum have constituted one of the three pillars of the early BRICS cooperation mechanism, alongside the finance ministers and central bank governors' meetings and the senior repre-

sentatives' meetings on security affairs. Particularly since China assumed the BRICS chairmanship in 2017, while continuing to strengthen traditional economic and political-security cooperation, it has meticulously cultivated cultural exchange achievements, ushering the BRICS mechanism from its previous "dual-track" approach into a new "three-wheel drive" phase featuring more balanced architecture, improved cooperation patterns, and a more solid foundation [1].

1.2 Think Tank Cooperation Driving the Mechanism Forward

From reforming the international financial system to BRICS financial cooperation, and from global economic governance reform to drawing wisdom on state governance, BRICS think tank cooperation has not only introduced new cooperation mechanisms and concepts across more domains horizontally but also promoted policy communication, stimulated intellectual innovation, and deepened mutual understanding vertically across multiple levels.

At the transnational level, the BRICS Academic Forum serves as a specialized meeting held in conjunction with the BRICS Leaders' Summit. Since the first informal "BRIC" Academic Forum was held in India in May 2009 as part of the preparations for the Yekaterinburg Leaders' Meeting, successive BRICS chair countries have organized eight forums (see Table 2). The second forum in Brasilia established an institutionalized platform for "BRIC" think tank exchanges and proposed initiatives to strengthen cooperation among the four countries. The third forum in Beijing set clear themes and specific topics, marking the formal launch of BRICS think tank cooperation. The fifth forum witnessed the establishment of the BRICS Think Tanks Council, a major outcome of the Durban Leaders' Summit. The Academic Forum acts as a binding agent for the BRICS cooperation mechanism—by sharing experiences and facilitating exchanges, it reduces friction among member states and enhances mutual trust. Outcomes and proposals generated by the forum can be submitted directly to the Leaders' Summit, with approved initiatives incorporated into summit declarations. The Think Tanks Council serves as a link between civil societies of member states, providing a platform for scholars to propose new ideas and suggestions to policymakers free from political pressure and laying the foundation for broader interdisciplinary cooperation.

At the national level, to coordinate research efforts scattered across different regions, departments, and institutions, Russia, China, and South Africa have seized the opportunity of hosting the BRICS Academic Forum to establish their own national-level coordination mechanisms. The Russian National Committee for BRICS Research, the South African BRICS Think Tank, and the Chinese Council for BRICS Think Tank Cooperation were successively established in September 2011, February 2015, and January 2017 under the authorization of then-President Dmitry Medvedev, South African Minister of Higher Education and Training Blade Nzimande, and the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, respectively (see Table 3). Under the guidance of these coordination mechanisms, BRICS think tanks and scholars have actively pro-

moted research and exchanges through publishing academic works, compiling annual reports, regularly holding international conferences, periodically conducting transnational personnel exchanges, and updating policy briefs and information sharing, thereby providing recommendations for functional cooperation and institutional development within BRICS.

2 Realistic Dilemmas Constraining BRICS Think Tank Cooperation

Due to characteristics such as the absence of specific regulations, lack of permanent institutions, and rotating chairmanship among member states, the advancement of the BRICS cooperation mechanism relies heavily on think tank support. However, in recent years, while playing a positive role, BRICS think tank cooperation has encountered numerous challenges stemming from multiple internal and external factors.

2.1 Strong Internal Drive but Capability-Demand Mismatch

The progressive advancement of cooperation at market, governmental, and international levels has endowed BRICS think tank cooperation with strong internal momentum while simultaneously imposing urgent demands on its content and depth. At the market level, trade and investment cooperation among BRICS multinational enterprises has become a trend of the times, yet numerous questions require attention from BRICS international economic think tanks: how to take collective action against rising protectionist tendencies amid anti-globalization trends; how to systematically strengthen BRICS economic partnerships as global value chains extend; and how to optimize the trade, investment, and business environment among member enterprises while breaking down relevant barriers. At the governmental level, BRICS countries can share experiences and lessons across all levels of government, yet domestic economic, environmental, social, and science and technology think tanks must urgently address: how to escape the “natural resource curse” and cross the “middle-income trap” to achieve sustainable growth; how to manage concomitant issues such as mounting environmental pressure and surging agricultural transfer populations in the new urbanization process; and how to promote joint research in ten major fields including new energy, renewable energy, and energy efficiency to advance technological innovation. At the international level, BRICS countries share strong cooperative will in promoting global economic governance and sustainable development, yet questions remain for international and domestic economic think tanks: how to break the U.S. monopoly on global credit rating markets to secure fairer ratings for emerging economies; how to achieve positive and reasonable interaction and coordination between China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union; and how to leverage the green finance functions of the New Development Bank to support sustainable development project financing in member states.

The reality, however, reveals a disconnect between the actual capabilities of BRICS think tanks and these practical demands, as they have yet to adequately address and thoroughly discuss these issues. Moreover, a prominent problem is that the focus areas of member states' think tanks do not fully intersect with BRICS cooperation domains. In international diplomacy and national security, for instance, Russian think tanks have successfully inherited Soviet academic traditions [3], while international relations and military defense are also priorities for renowned Indian and South African think tanks [4]. Brazil, however, remains relatively detached from international diplomacy and national security issues, and China consistently adheres to an economic development-centered approach with a fundamental policy of never seeking hegemony. Consequently, Brazil's and China's think tanks in these fields operate at relatively limited levels, resulting in insufficient joint efforts to promote cooperation in international diplomacy and national security. In domestic economics, while this domain has been a key focus for Brazilian and Russian think tanks that once embraced the Washington Consensus, and China's export-oriented growth model and GDP-centric government performance evaluation system have generated enormous demand for domestic economic think tanks, India's rigid social hierarchy and South Africa's white-dominated think tank landscape have prevented their domestic economic think tanks from excelling, weakening collaborative efforts in this area. In environmental issues, India's prominent energy and resource challenges have created opportunities for its energy and environmental think tanks [5], and South Africa has seen increasing numbers of environmental think tanks serving the country and sub-Saharan Africa, yet Brazil, Russia, and China have relatively limited think tank capacity in this domain, preventing breakthrough progress in environmental cooperation. Regarding people-to-people exchanges, while BRICS has traditionally focused on economic and political-security cooperation, the Xiamen Summit in September 2017 inaugurated a second "golden decade" and entrusted BRICS with a new historical mission, presenting think tanks with the practical task of regularizing, institutionalizing, and popularizing cultural exchanges—a subject requiring broader and deeper exploration and advancement.

2.2 BRICS Spirit Awaiting Dissemination, but Voice Generally Missing

BRICS has completed a historic transformation from a capital market investment concept to an international political and strategic force, yet the "open, inclusive, cooperative, and win-win" BRICS partnership spirit requires think tank dissemination. For instance, the "open" cooperation concept needs implementation in global governance. Under current complex international relations and disparate political power structures, BRICS international diplomacy think tanks must explore new pathways: how to coordinate relations between BRICS and other global governance actors [6], develop channels for dialogue with other major developing countries and developing country organizations, and initiate discussions on BRICS secondary expansion at appropriate times to enlarge the

BRICS “circle of friends.” In cultural exchanges, the “inclusive” cooperation concept is essential. As the saying goes, “state-to-state relations thrive when people forge bonds; people forge bonds when hearts connect.” The sustained deepening of BRICS cooperation requires strong public support, yet member states exhibit diverse cultural characteristics with significant regional differences. Cultural exchange think tanks must therefore propose solutions: how to identify the least common multiple and greatest common divisor of cultural traditions to seek common ground while reserving differences [7], how to effectively resolve historical issues between China and India to enhance political mutual trust among their peoples, and how to achieve high-level unity and consensus on major issues. In economic and financial cooperation, the “win-win” concept demands attention. As a key concern of the BRICS mechanism, financial cooperation requires economic think tanks to focus on: constructing a complete BRICS risk-sharing mechanism, strengthening insurance and reinsurance market cooperation, advancing financial infrastructure development to further capital market cooperation, and establishing BRICS-owned credit rating agencies.

However, influenced by recent changes in the international political and economic landscape, BRICS think tanks, despite achieving breakthroughs in quantity and scale, remain generally voiceless and unable to smoothly and comprehensively disseminate effective information to the outside world. In some information channels, their influence has even weakened. In compiling policy briefs and information sharing, for example, BRICS economic and trade think tanks should promptly update trade and investment opportunities to provide valuable references for enterprise decision-making and government macro-monitoring, yet some think tanks—particularly transnational networks—have long update intervals, with timely information updates limited to the initial period after their establishment. In publishing academic works and annual reports, most research 成果 are disseminated in local languages, with few outstanding works exchanged among member states. Notably, the number of BRICS-related academic papers published in Chinese journals declined in 2016 for the first time since 2010, indicating decreased domestic academic attention. In convening international conferences and personnel exchanges, relevant seminars should serve as platforms for think tanks to articulate BRICS perspectives and for stakeholders to exchange ideas, yet limiting participation to experts from member states undermines these objectives. Personnel exchanges primarily involve scholars visiting Western countries, with limited opportunities for exchanges among BRICS members themselves.

2.3 Urgent Need for Forward-looking Research, but Overall Independence is Weak

The original intention of institutionalized BRICS cooperation was to promote reform of the international financial system, yet Western obstruction of such reforms has lowered member states’ expectations of the cooperation mechanism itself. To inject fresh vitality, BRICS urgently needs to explore deeper cooper-

ation drivers and open up new cooperation areas beyond international politics and economics. This need was particularly evident during the second round of BRICS leaders' meetings, where issues such as cybersecurity (Fortaleza), human resources and employment (Ufa), migration and population mobility (Goa), and exploring new areas and methods of practical cooperation (Xiamen) all reflected awareness of new challenges and opportunities requiring forward-looking research from BRICS think tanks. Moreover, the very reason traditional cooperation areas have encountered obstacles is the lack of such forward-looking research. In financial cooperation, for instance, extensive think tank research only emerged after its formal proposal at the 2011 Sanya Summit, not before. Despite rich content in bilateral and multilateral capital market cooperation, international and domestic economic think tanks have shown limited attention to this issue. Similarly, prior to the 2014 Fortaleza meeting, think tanks paid little attention to insurance and reinsurance market cooperation. To date, BRICS think tank research has been primarily explanatory rather than forward-looking. Without adequate forward-looking research, think tanks can at best serve as propaganda and interpretation agencies for government policies and corporate strategies, failing to become the sound mind of BRICS.

Relative independence is the prerequisite for forward-looking research, and the insufficient forward-looking research in BRICS think tanks stems from their overall lack of independence. While Brazilian and South African think tanks can often provide more independent opinions to their governments, this is clearly not the case for Russian, Indian, and Chinese think tanks, where supporting government policies is more common practice. Most Russian think tanks are government-dependent, operating on funding from state budgets or large state-owned enterprises. Under economic pressure, Russian experts rarely dare to publicly voice opposing opinions or innovative suggestions to leaders, instead conducting explanatory research that speculates about leadership intentions. India's rigid social hierarchy and caste system constraints limit think tank development, with the government intolerant of public dissent or criticism. Think tanks receiving government funding essentially work on "assigned topics," while those accepting Western donations face deregistration as charitable organizations [8]. The vast majority of Chinese think tanks are government or quasi-government entities, with daily and personnel expenses covered by government appropriations or contracts. Under such circumstances, think tanks struggle to conduct independent, creative forward-looking research or raise questioning, independent opinions, often becoming mere promoters and interpreters of government policies. In fact, not every BRICS think tank expert is a government diplomat, and there is no reason to require their views on BRICS to completely align with their country's diplomatic stance. Therefore, based on their own judgment, some think tank experts' disagreement with or even questioning of their government's BRICS policies may be academically necessary.

3 Countermeasures and Suggestions for Promoting BRICS Think Tank Cooperation

BRICS think tanks should address their shortcomings in line with the practical requirements of BRICS mechanism construction and their own actual conditions, thereby further leveraging their positive role.

3.1 Building Professional and Characteristic Think Tanks and Constructing Shared Think Tank Networks

Strengthening consulting and research capabilities is essential. Faced with new demands from market, government, and international levels, BRICS think tanks should serve not only public policy but also provide necessary intellectual support for the growing number of BRICS enterprises. BRICS countries should clearly distinguish between government and market boundaries, entrusting issues concerning public interests to non-profit think tanks for evaluation while leaving problems solvable through market mechanisms to for-profit consulting firms. For think tanks, independence is the core of continuous narrative; they should clarify their identity, development 思路, and articulate unique viewpoints. Professionalism is the prerequisite for high-quality ideas; think tanks should leverage their expertise, focus their attention, and improve research quality. Publicness is the method and goal for demonstrating humanistic care; think tanks should coordinate public interests to the greatest extent, uphold social fairness and justice, and promote stable social progress. Consulting firms, as think tanks in a broad sense [10], primarily serve enterprises—the cells of the national economy—while providing government consulting when necessary. Under open economic conditions, enterprise managers' demand for consulting services will substantially increase, imposing higher requirements on the consulting industry. BRICS countries should vigorously develop their domestic consulting industries, drawing upon the experience of India's Tata Consultancy Services when necessary, to enhance support for enterprises, break the long-standing monopoly of Western institutions like McKinsey, Boston Consulting, and Bain, and foster positive interaction between consulting firms and think tanks.

Meanwhile, BRICS think tanks should recognize the power of “staying warm together,” fully leveraging comparative advantages across different domains, innovating cooperation models, strengthening institutional constraints, and constructing problem- and domain-oriented professional and comprehensive BRICS think tank networks to facilitate talent and information cooperation, exchange, complementarity, and sharing across BRICS countries. Brazilian international economic think tanks, Russian international diplomacy, national security, and education think tanks, Indian energy, environment, and science and technology think tanks, Chinese health think tanks, and South African social think tanks each represent comparative advantages. Indian and South African domestic economic think tanks can learn from Brazilian, Russian, and Chinese experiences, while Brazilian, Chinese, and South African international development think tanks can provide references for Russian and Indian operations. Under the

guidance of national BRICS think tank coordination mechanisms, these characteristic think tanks can serve as basic building blocks for constructing BRICS think tank networks, forming professional and comprehensive networks through parallel or core-radiating models based on shared concerns, thereby achieving organic “series” and “parallel” connections [11]. If BRICS think tanks can successfully interconnect and integrate under the leadership of these characteristic think tanks, their complementary advantages will more comprehensively serve both the BRICS cooperation mechanism and BRICS enterprises. Additionally, the organizational structure of the BRICS Think Tanks Council should be further improved, with other countries’ think tanks invited as observers when necessary to enhance transparency and 议事 quality.

3.2 Leveraging Synergistic Cooperation Effects and Concentrating Voice through Complementary Advantages

Strengthening discourse-shaping capacity is crucial. BRICS think tank cooperation should extend beyond inter-think tank collaboration to encompass cooperation with other institutions. First, numerous cooperation mechanisms under the BRICS framework share common goals; think tanks should therefore emphasize synergy with other platforms within the BRICS cooperation framework. They should actively participate in working group meetings such as the Anti-Corruption Working Group and expert meetings like the Business Council to better understand high-level policy needs and listen to grassroots expert feedback. They should utilize platforms like the BRICS Media Summit and Competition Conference to promptly release research 成果 such as BRICS development reports and public opinion observations, seizing the academic high ground in global BRICS research and enhancing global 舆论 guidance. They should also leverage events like the BRICS Games and Film Festival to transmit the BRICS partnership spirit of equal cooperation to the public. Second, as representative major emerging economies, BRICS countries should strengthen Track II exchanges and collaboration with other global cooperation and dialogue mechanisms, promoting dialogue and cooperation between BRICS international diplomacy think tanks and the UN General Assembly and European Commission, national security think tanks and the UN Security Council and OSCE, international and domestic economic think tanks and the G20, energy and resource think tanks and OPEC and IEA, international development think tanks and the World Bank Group and IMF, environmental think tanks and UNEP, social, educational, and science and technology think tanks and UNESCO, and health think tanks and WHO. Third, amid rising “anti-globalization” or “de-globalization” forces in recent years, BRICS should uphold the “BRICS Plus” concept, gradually and appropriately 吸纳 other developing economies to expand cooperation scale and increase forces promoting globalization. BRICS think tanks should conduct feasibility studies and build consensus on the BRICS Research and Exchange Fund proposed in the Xiamen Declaration and initiated by China, contributing to the steady normalization of the new “BRICS Plus” cooperation model.

Furthermore, facing widespread skepticism from Western financial media and mainstream society about whether BRICS can maintain its “golden luster,” and pessimistic narratives from multinational investment banks including Goldman Sachs, BRICS think tanks should strengthen and enhance their capacity to comprehensively promote the BRICS partnership concept. Through complementary advantages among different think tanks, they should interpret the BRICS cooperation mechanism to the public, actively guide public attention and participation in relevant discussions, and enable people worldwide to better understand and identify with BRICS’ identity and positions from a social 舆论 perspective. Different think tank types possess distinct advantages: government think tanks facilitate local research, university think tanks boast more rational academic 梯队 structures, social think tanks enjoy greater intellectual freedom, and media think tanks dominate 舆论 guidance. Therefore, a new BRICS think tank cooperation model should be explored featuring government think tank leadership, university think tank participation, social think tank authorship, and media think tank voice. Meanwhile, different think tank domains can intersect to generate emerging fields of attention. Conversely, answers to certain social 热点 issues require collaborative efforts from think tanks across various domains. Discussions on national governance modernization demand cross-collaboration among international diplomacy, national security, and social think tanks; research on national financial security requires joint efforts from national security and international/domestic economic think tanks; and attention to state-owned enterprise reform governance necessitates cooperation between social and international/domestic economic think tanks.

3.3 Advocating Independent Research and Stimulating Vitality of Social Think Tanks

Enhancing independent operational capacity is essential. While theories may adequately explain the past, they cannot precisely predict the future; a gap exists between theoretical research and practical application, making forward-looking research the lifeblood of think tanks. If think tanks constantly cater to government policies and corporate strategies, merely conducting cautious explanatory research, their research horizons will remain constrained by existing institutional frameworks and their value will be severely diminished. Therefore, academic research taboos should be maximally dismantled to encourage independent viewpoints on specific issues. From government and corporate perspectives, research should have no forbidden zones while propaganda may have discipline; think tank research freedom should be enhanced. When think tanks reach conclusions through rigorous analysis that contradict current policies or strategies, the latter should adopt more tolerant attitudes toward dissenting opinions. While publication of research 成果 can be regulated separately, governments and enterprises must encourage forward-looking research. From the think tank perspective, research should boldly hypothesize while conclusions carefully verify; the robustness and 转化度 of research 成果 should be improved. The certain present does not guarantee an inevitable future. Facing uncertain-

ties in future government management and corporate operations, think tanks should introduce quantitative analytical methods such as scenario analysis and sensitivity analysis to propose different coping strategies under various future conditions, thereby enhancing the intuitiveness, reliability, and feasibility of their conclusions. Moreover, BRICS think tank cooperation should 跳出 Western think tanks' traditional strongholds, thereby enjoying late-mover advantages in emerging domains such as artificial intelligence, the sharing economy, and cultural exchanges.

Social think tanks represent one of the most intellectually active groups within BRICS think tanks. As the BRICS mechanism enters its second decade, member states should stimulate the vitality of social think tanks, enhance interconnectivity, strengthen cooperation, pool collective wisdom, and improve quality, thereby elevating the overall independence of BRICS think tanks. BRICS countries should create opportunities for social think tank development, provide necessary financial and personnel support, and introduce incentive mechanisms to enable them to leverage respective strengths and learn from each other, accelerating development pace. Government and corporate consulting channels should be improved, with further promotion of government information disclosure and relaxed restrictions to enable social think tanks to access all necessary information for policy analysis. To address funding challenges, BRICS should draw upon multi-level industrial fund experiences to broaden funding sources, ensuring that any future BRICS Research and Exchange Fund would also be accessible to social think tanks. A BRICS Think Tank Development Guidance Fund could be established with state finance to raise social capital for multiple 母 funds, which would then launch 子 funds or make direct investments to support social think tanks, thereby increasing support from private and trust funds. Tax reductions and exemptions should be granted for donations from individuals and enterprises to social think tanks to support their development and maintain research independence. To address talent shortages, a more positive, open, and inclusive attitude should be adopted to encourage retired technical professionals not covered by delayed retirement policies to establish and join BRICS social think tanks, optimizing talent allocation and professional knowledge structures to comprehensively enhance their consulting capacity and policy influence on BRICS decision-making, jointly mapping out a new blueprint for BRICS unity and cooperation in its second “golden decade.”

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