



Written by [Anthea Pollock](#) on February 16, 2021

Is Being Part of BRICS Really Helping South Africa?

Many South Africans are questioning why President Cyril Ramaphosa hasn't mentioned South Africa's membership in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) bloc of nations in any of his announcements concerning the country's supply source of COVID-19 vaccines. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that Russia's foreign ministry reported being in bilateral talks with South Africa regarding their Sputnik V vaccine — which revealed an efficacy of 91.6 percent in an advanced clinical trial (published in the *Lancet* medical journal) — the world's first registered vaccine against coronavirus infection.



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The omission is even more puzzling in light of this statement by South Africa's Health Department spokesperson, Popo Maja:

Plans of securing Sputnik V are in the pipeline. The feeling among our local partners and scientists about Sputnik V is mutual. Much as the world is facing a vaccine competition, we are lucky to be part of the BRICS community — and feel safe now that we have options such as those the Gamaleya Institute of Russia is developing. So, yes, plans are afoot to secure the Sputnik V as time goes by.”

However, in a recent presentation before the United Nations, scientists from the Gamaleya Institute revealed that countries at the front of the queue for Sputnik V included Israel, Hungary, Venezuela, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Algeria, and Morocco. As of February 8, Sputnik V was officially registered for use in Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Guinea, Hungary, Iran, Mexico, Nicaragua, Palestine, Paraguay, Russia, Serbia, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela. Conspicuously, South Africa is not on either of those lists.

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Why has South Africa failed to leverage the evident success of its accomplished ally, particularly when BRICS members Brazil, China, and India have been granted domestic production of the Russian vaccine? While Sputnik V is more expensive than the AstraZeneca vaccine, it is proven to offer more protection against the 501Y variant of COVID identified in South Africa. Despite Maja's claims, it seems unreasonable that South Africa is unable to get quick approval of the Russian vaccine while so many other countries are already set up to receive it.

Additionally, China's Sinopharm vaccine — which has shown a 79-percent efficacy rate in Phase Three Trials (according to a statement released by the Beijing Institute of Biological Products) — has been approved for general public use in South Africa and is currently being administered for emergency use



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in both the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Sinopharm has proven to be more effective against South Africa's strain of coronavirus than the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Interestingly, South Africa has purchased the AstraZeneca vaccine, and has paid India double the price paid by other wealthier countries to acquire it (U.S. \$5.25 per dose for 1.5 million shots, according to Reuters). And it appears that BRICS partner India was dragging its feet on filling those orders, according a February 7 article at South Africa's online newspaper, Times LIVE:

It was only when the first million doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid-19 arrived at OR Tambo Airport last week that health authorities received a surprise: the shots [coming from India] were expiring well ahead of what had been planned for.

So South Africa, despite being a member of a trade bloc with Russia, China, and India, is not on the short list to receive the successful Russian vaccine or the Chinese vaccine, and is getting ripped off by India with the receipt of nearly expired AstraZeneca vaccines. What advantage does South Africa have as a BRICS bloc member during this fight against the COVID-19 pandemic?

Some have argued that BRICS is much more a China-with-partners group than a union of equal members, considering the dominance of the Chinese economy and its role in trade relations with its partners. Indeed, South Africa has projected an image of being submissive and conformist to China. It seems South Africa has been neglected by its supposed BRICS allies.

Perhaps it's time for the nation to re-examine its membership in the bloc, as it seems to be getting the short end of the stick.



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