

# Diplomats on BRICS: Drawbacks and benefits of cooperation without integration

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*BRICS, a geopolitical project-type organization, has become the object of heightened research interest by some, sceptical controversy/dismissal by others and tacit neglect by most in mainstream academic studies. Disagreements range significantly from its ability to remain united in the absence of meaningful commitments to integration, to its real capacity to wield behavior-transforming power on the international stage and stand up to a unipolar American-led world. Its five historic members – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – recently joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have come a long way in their cooperation since the first summits were held in the 2000s and have even embarked on a semblance of institutionalization process with the creation of the New Development Bank which allows the countries to support each other by circumventing both the US dollar and the Western financial system. The future of BRICS remains, however, indeterminate, with few studies making sense of the perceptions of its members' leaders and the challenges they face on a daily basis in maintaining this apparently disparate format. The present qualitative study is based on 21 anonymous expert interviews with diplomats from BRICS countries in which they reveal the true mechanisms at work in the bloc and the way in which a basic set of values concerning international interaction glues the organization together. The findings show that integration is not a condition sine qua non for successful, long-term cooperation. By refusing to give up on anything they value (particularly sovereignty) and by avoiding open confrontation, BRICS members have been able to creatively establish a platform for cooperation that allows them to successfully accomplish a number of their foreign policy and economic goals on their own terms without compromising their pledge on sovereignty and perceived autonomy of foreign policy action.*

**Keywords:** BRICS; multipolar world; diplomats; emerging markets; Ukraine 2022; New Development Bank

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# Дипломаты о БРИКС: недостатки и преимущества сотрудничества без интеграции

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*БРИКС, межстрановое объединение проектного типа, стало предметом повышенного исследовательского интереса одних учёных, скептических оценок других и молчаливого пренебрежения со стороны большей части академического сообщества стран коллективного Запада. Диапазон взглядов значительно варьируется от тезиса о потенциале БРИКС «говорить в один голос» в отсутствие значимых обязательств по формально-правовой интеграции до сомнений в реальной способности организации противостоять однополярному миру, возглавляемому Америкой. Пять её первоначальных членов – Бразилия, Россия, Индия, Китай и позднее Южная Африка – к которым недавно присоединились Египет, Эфиопия, Иран, Саудовская Аравия и Объединенные Арабские Эмираты, прошли долгий путь в своем сотрудничестве с момента проведения первых саммитов в 2000-х гг. Инициирована даже своего рода институционализация с созданием Нового банка развития, который позволяет странам поддерживать друг друга, обходя как привязку к доллару США, так и западную финансовую систему в целом. Однако будущее БРИКС остается неопределенным, поскольку лишь немногие исследования дают представление о взглядах лидеров стран-членов и о проблемах, с которыми они сталкиваются ежедневно при поддержании этого не самого типичного международного объединения. Настоящее качественное исследование основано на 21 анонимном экспертном интервью с дипломатами из стран БРИКС, в которых они раскрывают истинные механизмы, работающие в блоке, и то, как базовый набор ценностей, касающихся международного взаимодействия, сплачивает организацию. Результаты показывают, что интеграция не является необходимым условием результативного долгосрочного сотрудничества. Ценностная близость в вопросах основ миропорядка позволила странам-участницам БРИКС создать платформу для сотрудничества, которая дает им возможность успешно решать ряд внешнеполитических и экономических задач на своих условиях без ущерба для суверенных полномочий и автономии внешнеполитических действий.*

**Ключевые слова:** БРИКС; многополярный мир; дипломаты; развивающиеся рынки; украинский кризис; Новый банк развития

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**JEL codes:** F50, F53, F55, P50

## Introduction

“BRICS should be driven by ‘People to People’ contact. It should explore developing innovative mechanisms of youth engagement”. This position articulated by the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi at a 2023 Youth Summit specifically crystalizes what BRICS is not: it is, at least for now, not an organization of people, but, rather, of elites. Meanwhile the idea that BRICS leaders expressly aspire to see cooperation between their civil societies may suggest that they want to take their partnership a step further and possibly start integration mechanisms, as illustrated by the ambitious free trade zone currently being reviewed by its members. Nonetheless, a closer look points to the fact that the nature of BRICS as a formation, both historically and to the present day, is inherently high-level, or top-to-top, not even top-down.

BRIC refers to the foreign policy grouping created by Brazil, Russia, India and China in 2006 and joined by South Africa in 2010, henceforth becoming BRICS. The term BRIC was coined by a Goldman Sachs economist in 2001. This geopolitical bloc has since slowly evolved from simply engaging in discussions on global affairs to making first attempts at institutionalization and openly challenging the Western-led rules-based world order. Yet, several principal questions remain unaddressed and unresolved interfering with its coming of age and maturation as a tangible geopolitical force to be reckoned with.

The first and foremost one is: How effective is BRICS at promoting its members’ national interests? The focus is not placed on whether the BRICS countries are or will become great powers, whether they will succeed in creating a multipolar world or whether the grouping will succeed in institutionalising and deepening its ties. The analytical goal is to determine whether this type of political and economic grouping yields tangible benefits to its members and whether it is possible for each state to participate without experiencing resentment and internal political discord at making more concessions than other members (absolute vs. relative gains). The research question central to our study thus is as follows: Can a state gain in respect and power on the international stage by forming alliances that involve no integration mechanisms and in no way affect member-states’ sovereign prerogatives?

In order to bring a clear-cut answer to this question, the authors survey the history of the formation of BRICS in order to better grasp the circumstances and material factors that brought them together. A systematic review of the expert literature reveals the main debates scholars are concerned with, particularly the prospects of transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar world, the internal conflicts that challenge BRICS as a unified structure, the economic dominance of China in the organization, the values that constitute the basis of BRICS cooperation, the organization’s position on sovereignty, military interventions and the ‘responsibility to protect’. Experts are divided in their assessment of the future of BRICS with some noting that the organization is circumstantial and cannot survive based on an identity built exclusively on a common opposition to the West (Pant, 2016), while others decry this vision and argue that the core values of sovereignty and equality transcend time and minor disagreements and allow BRICS to project to the world their common vision (Brosig, 2024, Stuenkel, 2015).

In this paper, we investigate whether, in order to be effective in advancing its members’ interests, an international format of this sort needs to have the capacity to impose compromises upon its members, whether states need to renounce some of their national ambitions or sovereign authority so as to jointly and individually be able to wield more power as a mere consequence of having such an organisation in place. A qualitative research design, based on twenty-one interviews with diplomats from all BRICS countries, offers a novel, inside and high-level perspective on the future of BRICS with an original vantage point on its achievements and difficulties. The findings shed a light on the advantages and drawbacks of different forms of cooperation, the frustrations and perceived benefits of engaging in BRICS for member states and the impact of the 2022 Ukraine crisis on the organization. The interviews reveal that members experience a satisfaction from the interaction within BRICS specifically because no ‘sacrifices’ are required of them and their internal policies are not subject to peer scrutiny and evaluation. They attribute the smooth functioning of the organization to a tacit understanding that confrontation should be avoided at all costs and that the focus should be put on developing cooperation in those spheres where it is possible and mutually beneficial.

The remainder of the paper is structured in four sections: the literature review which considers the origins of BRICS and its place in the current global (dis)order, is followed by a methodological section which presents the research design. The findings are presented in the fourth section and the results are discussed thereafter. The paper concludes by summarizing the argument and suggesting avenues for subsequent research.

## Literature review

### *The formation of BRICS*

The BRICS started out as a disparate group of countries with the primary intention of contesting the Western dominated world order. Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov was the first to suggest that the largest emerging economies could play a more significant role in defining the rules of global politics when in 1996 he made a keynote speech on multipolarity which is widely regarded to have put down the original footing for the foundation of BRICS (Rewizorski, 2015). The term BRIC (originality excluding South Africa) was invented by Jim O'Neill in his 30<sup>th</sup> November 2001 working paper for Goldman Sachs and refers to rising economic potential of Brazil, Russia, India and China. The novelty of this paper stemmed from the forecast that the significant economic growth of these emergent economies would bring about reorganization of global fiscal and monetary policies and the recommendation that BRIC representatives be included in world policy-making forums<sup>1</sup>. There was at the time no prediction that the BRIC countries would seek to form a political alliance but, rather, that their common economic interests would lead to some economic agreements, which might have in time a spill-over political effect. Subsequent Goldman Sachs reports evaluated the growth potential of emergent economies and assessed the timeframe in which they would catch up with the G7, the group containing the seven most advanced economies (Wilson and Purushothaman, 2003).

The political birth of BRIC took place during the 2000s, with meetings bringing together two or three members of the future alliance at a time. President Lula after his 2003 inauguration as President of Brazil invited representatives of South Africa and Brazil to discuss the creation of a group guided by common interests (Vieira and Ouriques, 2016). At the WTO meeting in 2003 in Cancun, China, India and Brazil coordinated their actions and jointly expressed disagreement with the Doha Round Agreement which was promoted by the West (Mattoo et al., 2011). The Iraq war has also been viewed as a catalyst in the creation of the BRIC; the argument being that the United States had started to use force unilaterally and unpunished to promote its own interests and needed to be contained (Laidi, 2011). The idea of defending national sovereignty and stigmatizing the concept of 'preemptive war' was something all future BRIC members were keen to defend from the outset.

The first official BRIC meeting was organized in 2006 on the side-lines of the 61<sup>st</sup> UN General Assembly meeting and the four countries began an official political dialogue through their foreign ministers (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). Meetings on a ministerial level became from that date a common occurrence and many topics were touched upon, including healthcare, environmental protection, industry, and international politics. The 2008 economic crisis boosted the BRIC cooperation mechanism as it fragilized Western players on the financial markets and exposed their vulnerabilities. The crisis affected emerging economies less virulently as they were less engaged and indebted on the global financial markets. The creation of the G20 was an attempt to include BRIC and other emerging economies in global governance and to modernize financial institutions (Larionova and Shelepov, 2022). However, it only partially met their needs: although it addressed the issue of their participation in regulating the global economy and making it a safer place, it ran the risk of dissolving their identity in a larger mass and was hence met with ambiguity (Laidi, 2011). The BRIC countries started to join efforts in requesting a more balanced economic system, and large commercial players like China started to adopt first measures to promote their national currencies in international trade and open international financial hubs (Roberts et al., 2018). The idea that the emerging world should be protected against the excesses of the Western financial system also became commonplace. This put into motion the slow rejection of the absolute dominance of the dollar in international transactions. South Africa joining the BRIC, which turned into BRICS, in 2011 reflected the wider appeal of the organization.

At the 7<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit, the countries created the New Development Bank to help finance infrastructure and development projects. The bank was designed with the purpose of counterbalancing institutions led by the United States such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Pant, 2016). Its management was predicated on the idea of equal weight of each country in decision-making, regardless of its contribution or size (Stuenkel, 2015). One of the starkest milestones of the cooperation was the 10<sup>th</sup> BRICS summit in Johannesburg in 2018 during which the heads of states reaffirmed their commitment to a set of joint values featuring 'mutual respect, sovereign equality, democracy, inclusiveness and strengthened collaboration' and to pursuing their stra-

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, J. (2001). Building better global economic BRICs. *Global Economics Paper* no 66. <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/archive/building-better.html> (accessed on December 10, 2023)

tegic partnership to promote ‘peace, a fairer international order, sustainable development and inclusive growth’<sup>2</sup>. These values and the commitment to upholding the principle of state sovereignty above all else are reflected in the united front that BRICS countries put up in the face of the question of the ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine. Although none of these states openly rejects the R2P principle and all to some extent recognize that governments have a humanitarian responsibility towards their people, BRICS share a common fear that the West has taken liberties in applying humanitarian law (Nikitin, 2018, Ziegler, 2016). Regime change as effected in the case of the 2011 Libya intervention was condemned by BRICS countries all of which went to great lengths to underscore on numerous occasions that the mission had gone beyond the UN mandate (Hehir, 2012).

### ***Critical analysis of BRICS in the global order***

In the 2010s, expert opinions emphasized the upcoming power of BRICS, which already represented over 20% of the global GDP and whose countries were, for the most part, experiencing rapid growth rates and the desire for a new redivision of the world (Sergeev, 2020). The creation of the New Development Bank in 2015 marks the group’s desire to institutionalize their cooperation in a few specific spheres, mainly infrastructure and sustainable development. It reflects the readiness of BRICS countries to take careful steps forward towards playing a more significant part in global financial governance and also their willingness to make the cooperation more concrete<sup>3</sup>. The mechanisms governing the bank’s functioning reflect its members’ focus on sovereignty, particularly the use of ‘country systems’ that constrain outside actors to use the home country’s administrative systems when financially interacting with a country (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). The priority given to loans in local currencies aims to protect the receivers of funding from currency volatility and also offers an opportunity to disentangle from the dollar in the longer run. The focus on a small scope of activities and the priority given to funding private organizations and not just states projects makes it more flexible than some of the other larger international financial institutions. The 2014 Treaty for the Establishment of a BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement<sup>4</sup> allowed for a solidarity mechanism by which its members protect each other against global liquidity pressures and help each other respond to balance-of-payments difficulties. The New Development Bank was specifically created to offer emerging countries the political clout that is proportionate to their growing economic weight and reinforce South-South cooperation. As noted by Paulo Nogueira Batista Jr., the first Vice-President of the NDB: ‘We decided to pave our own way. We would never have done this if these institutions [World Bank, IMF] were more malleable’ (as cited in Hooijmaaijers, 2022: 485). The initiative with time went beyond the scope of BRICS countries, with the bank welcoming in 2021 Bangladesh, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Uruguay as its new members<sup>5</sup>. While it might have an impact on the pristine credit rating of the bank, the core members have regardless expressed the desire to see it expand and not turn into an elite club.

BRICS as an organization faces a number of challenges including discrepancies in economic weight, military clout and population size of each member country. The establishment of the New Development Bank is a significant accomplishment as it reveals that the grouping is not contingent on specific circumstances and political leaders but aims for continuity. The negotiation process that underpinned it did, however, illuminate some tensions between its members, particularly between India and China, which have among other troubles a disputed border with occasional military flare-ups. The success in creating the bank has been put down to a combination of ‘strong common social purpose’ and fragile structural power (Helleiner and Wang, 2018: 575). The creation of the bank has not, nonetheless, undercut the other financial institutions and their functioning in any significant way: developing countries remain underrepresented in the World Bank and the IMF which have not undergone any significant reform processes (Larionova and Shelepov, 2022). The opposition of the US to reform appears robust even though the share of BRICS countries in the global economy keeps growing, even following the Covid pandemic

<sup>2</sup> X BRICS Summit Johannesburg Declaration (2018). [http://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/hywj/ODS/202203/t20220308\\_10649503.html](http://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/hywj/ODS/202203/t20220308_10649503.html) (accessed on December 10, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> Maasdorp, L. (2019). BRICS’ New Development Bank turns four: What has it achieved? <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/brics-new-development-bank-four-sustainability/> (accessed on December 10, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Treaty for the Establishment of a BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (2014). <https://www.hse.ru/data/2016/02/10/1139831208/CRA.pdf> (accessed on December 10, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> New Development Bank (2023). <https://www.ndb.int/news/new-development-bank-welcomed-brazils-president-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-at-ndb-headquarters-in-shanghai/> (accessed on December 10, 2023)

(Vaslavsky, 2021). While the potential power of the bank to render the global governance system fairer remains uncertain, there is no doubt that changes in relative power will bring about institutional change which may be radical rather than progressive due to the current blockage process.

According to some experts, the main risk the BRICS grouping faces today comes from within as differences in relative power between countries like Russia, China and India are likely to grow, making it difficult for its founders to remain equal players within BRICS structures (Lipton, 2017). Studies on trade patterns since the beginning of BRICS countries' political cooperation indicate that there is a convergence between the countries' economies, but that it is not yet significant enough to talk about the beginning of the formation of an economic bloc (Lohani, 2021). China's economy is currently only second globally to the United States and it is larger than that of all other BRICS countries together: this power gap makes other states nervous and explains why they themselves are involved in counterbalancing the power of BRICS by participating in other organizations (Pant, 2013). As China's economy continues its ascent, Brazil, South Africa and Russia are experiencing different levels of low-rate growth stagnation.

While BRICS countries' discourse predominantly revolves about political equality, the facts do not always follow, with China sometimes applying its huge leverage capacity to promote its own interests in spite of the indirect economic costs for other BRICS states. An example of this is how China's management of its currency, specifically the undervaluation of the Yuan, has been linked to problems in India's manufacturing industry, leading to multiple protests from the country's government and to the adoption of protectionist measures in defence of local Indian firms (Pant, 2013). The increasing 'Yuanization' of the global economy resulting from Western sanctions on Russia may increase this trend (Nazarov, 2024; Volynskiy et al., 2023). The construction of political power of BRICS depends on the efficiency of the narratives developed by the member states and their capacity for solidarity (Van Noort, 2019). The quest for a multipolar world may also be considered a dangerous endeavour as the potential for rivalry and the competition over resources could lead to an increase in military confrontations (Van Noort, 2019, Istomin, 2022). Some researchers already argue that BRICS as an alliance is losing ground on the international stage, with domestic problems preventing emerging states from projecting power on the international stage (Brosig, 2024). The latest addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to BRICS in January 2024 highlights the attractiveness of the organization and its capacity to bring on board other countries of the 'South'. Recent literature on BRICS investigates its role in the digital economy (Ignatov, 2020), trade competition (Yarygina and Zhiglyayeva, 2021) and the challenges faced by specific countries within the organisation (Ren et al., 2020).

## Methodology

The qualitative research design for this study has been developed to specifically and effectively answer the following research question: Can a state gain in prestige and influence on the international stage by forming alliances that involve no integration mechanisms and in no way affect member-states' sovereign authority? The methodology was created in order to fulfil a gap in the existing scholarly literature. Although previous studies have surveyed popular opinion and studied the official governmental narrative through discourse analysis, informal anonymous discussions and focus groups, the understanding of the future of BRICS hinges among other things upon the work and beliefs of each member's foreign ministry. The original interviews carried out by the authors with diplomats allow for a new perspective: an informed, candid, high-level analysis of BRICS beyond discourses; gleaning information from those people who are routinely involved in the building and cultivation of preferential diplomatic ties. The experts were selected based on a number of criteria: being in the official diplomatic corps of Brazil, Russia, India, China or South Africa, being directly involved in BRICS cooperation (organizing events, interaction with the media, speeches in public forums, creating social media presence) and being willing to share a personal perspective rather than just conveying the official political line of their country. While the goal was not to gather controversial information, the creation of a relationship of mutual trust with respondents was important to get a clearer picture from behind the scenes of BRICS cooperation. Access to the first set of respondents was provided by one of the co-authors who met them through his/her work, and further recommendations were made after the first interviews were successfully conducted.

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out by two of the authors between January and March 2023. A questionnaire was prepared in order to make the respondents' answers comparable but everyone was also given the opportunity to express their own ideas and share thoughts on

other topics. The transcripts were in some cases translated into English (depending on the language in which they were conducted) and then were coded in order to create overarching themes which guided the findings of this paper and their interpretation. The anonymized list of interviews is presented in Appendix, and illustrative excerpts are presented to characterize the main findings in the following section of this paper. During the interview process and afterwards, ethical best practices were complied with: the goal of the study was shared with all participants and they were given the opportunity to retract their contribution at any time prior to publication. Anonymity was protected through file inscription. The findings were triangulated with other sources and factual details were checked in order to ascertain the reliability of the information communicated by each respondent.

A quantitative analysis of research interest in BRICS compared to other international groupings (the United Nations were selected as a reference point for comparison) enables the authors to triangulate the findings from the interviews and to determine whether academics believe that BRICS has a future worth investigating and analyzing. Research interest was measured by comparing the number of new articles published each year between 2011 and 2022 in Google Scholar. This database presents the advantage of hosting a large number of articles from scholars based in universities and research centres all around the world.

## Findings

The first finding of this study is that *diplomats do not regard as a principal raison d'être of BRICS to further the integration of BRICS countries (defined as harmonization of standards and operation of unified governance machinery) but to promote interstate coordination and symbolic endorsement, or "friendship" (mutual support for one another's stances on critical international issues that may be vital for a grouping's partner, mutual respect for fundamental values of international life and coordination of action in pursuit of shared or parallel interests)*. This has to be distinguished from integration, or privileged political and economic cooperation, which prioritizes intra-group interactions both rhetorically and numerically (in terms of intra-group trade, microeconomic collaborations and macroeconomic coordination). Although there is media communication about attempts aimed at fostering ties between the civil communities of BRICS countries as illustrated by the BRICS youth forum, **the goal is not to mitigate but to celebrate the differences between the peoples**. It has been argued in the literature, however, that cultural and linguistic differences, albeit highly valued, represent an objective barrier to deeper interaction and a single civil community. These factors are recognized by respondents who point out that public diplomacy initiatives are aimed at reducing the possible perception of a democratic deficit in the functioning of BRICS and at preparing each country individually for the prospects of deeper political interactions. The initiatives to reach out to citizens serve the purpose of increasing acceptance of the development of a BRICS political high-level formation, as a way of making people aware and accept the political proximity of their respective leaderships.

*'Integration requires to a large extent being neighbours and anyway it's not like we want to become the European Union. BRICS has a different mission, and my role is to prepare the ground for public acceptance of collaboration between politicians.'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 6

*'The stated goals of the BRICS Youth Summits are worthwhile, for example to promote cultural cooperation and joint business initiatives through entrepreneurship and educational modules, but we understand the financial limitations and the restricted scope of their impact.'*

Brazilian Diplomat, Interview 3

*'Sometimes one can be friendly at a distance, in fact in life you usually get on better with those of your neighbours who do not live just next door. You naturally have less reasons to argue. The worst relationship within BRICS, China and India, results, among other things, from simply sharing a common border.'*

South African Diplomat, Interview 7

*'Initiatives to foster good social relations between BRICS countries are productive. The population accepts the alignment of foreign policy with another country better when the ground has been prepared, when the country is portrayed as a 'friend.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 1

Another major finding of this study also suggests that *diplomats fully embrace the vision at the heart of the BRICS construction that difficult issues are better ignored in order to concentrate on the issues where cooperation is possible*. Focusing on what unites and what might work out rather than on what sets apart or might fail because the time and material or ideational conditions are not yet ripe is rational according to most of the respondents. The diplomats do not express criticism over the fact that some points of contention are put aside; on the contrary, they believe that there is no point in focusing on those issues that cannot be resolved at a specific time. Likewise, BRICS countries refrain from commenting on internal crises experienced by some member-countries and on internal policy choices. This is to avoid creating long-lasting resentments that would be hard to overcome at a later date.

*'We avoid talking about conflictual issues at BRICS summits. We know they are there but we focus on the possibilities for cooperation. There is no need for two countries to hang out their dirty washing in public.'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 18

*'Talking about difficulties never leads anywhere good. In my marriage I have understood that it is more productive to let things slide than to 'have it out'. BRICS cooperation is wise and the European Union could learn a lot from it!'*

Chinese Diplomat, Interview 11

*'This restraint and tacit agreement not to talk about difficult issues does exist, for the better or the worse. I think it may be based on the Chinese principle of working around rather than through difficulties.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 13

Another idea conveyed by the respondents is that *the principle of sovereign equality remains central to BRICS cooperation and proves to be a robust bond that ties the countries together*. The principled refusal to meddle in other countries affairs is characteristic of the "BRICS way". Governments also refrain from linking economic issues with political ones and using pressure to force other countries to comply with their own political ideals. BRICS countries have varying forms of internal governance and do not seek to impose their vision on other states. Participation in different initiatives is voluntary and an effort is made to seek out a compromise. The focus is placed on the equal status and formal standing of states, regardless of their size or actual power they wield.

*'There is a shared understanding that we do not meddle in the internal affairs of other states and we expect the same from each member. We do not condone illiberal practices but we know better than to measure others by our standards which appeared as a result of our specific historical and cultural conditions.'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 19

*'In global politics, some states are democracies inside and authoritarian in foreign relations. I would rather the states I diplomatically interact with were the other way around.'*

South African Diplomat, Interview 20

*'Effective change takes place from within a country and external intervention is never the solution. BRICS countries have understood this and it is at the base of our cooperation.'*

Brazilian Diplomat, Interview 14

*'China is the uncontested economic leader but it abides by the principles of equality in interactions with other states which makes a change from the United States.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 2



*'BRICS is based on the acceptance of initial difference. We're not going to reproach anyone with anything or treat them differently because of it. Our belief in sovereignty and equality is shared by most countries in the world.'*

Brazilian Diplomat, Interview 5

*'BRICS functions based on an opt-in, opt-out basis and involves a lot of bilateral cooperation within the group.'*

Chinese Diplomat, Interview 10

The respondents also conveyed a viewpoint on how the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions have recently affected BRICS cooperation. Countries that were commonly expected, based on their liberal democratic regimes and close ties with the West, to turn their backs on Russia after the Ukraine crisis would not do so. India and Brazil have retained political neutrality and engaged in enhanced trade relations with Russia. China, in spite of significant pressure from the United States, has offered support to Russia in trade, commerce and even allegedly providing para-military hardware. BRICS countries appear from the interviews highly reluctant to take sides and have adopted a strategic position of supporting another country in its bid to counterbalance the US unipolar world.

*'We are working on a brand-new free trade zone with India. Western sanctions have brought together two countries [Russia and India] that have complementary economies, that can do a lot for each other.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 4

*'The United States and the United Kingdom have been truly surprised to discover that their sanctions have brought BRICS countries and the developing world closer together. India has its own path to tread and is gaining in independence.'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 17

*'BRICS countries, apart from Russia obviously, are tight-lipped about the Ukraine hostilities, and in spite of significant Western pressure, they pursue their neutral line which consists of wishing for a rapid resolution of the conflict but without taking sides.'*

Brazilian Diplomat, Interview 9

*'South Africa continues to hold drills and military exercises with Russia and China. These sessions are part of a planned joint training and we have no obligation to pull the plug on them.'*

South African Diplomat, Interview 8

*'Russia is facing off the United States and making it too busy to meddle in the internal affairs of other states. Maybe the US will not have the resources and time to launch another external war this decade.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 4

*'We do not accept the 'if you're not with us, you're against us' rhetoric of the West. The former colonies continue to tread the path of non-alignment.'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 6

Thoughts on the achievements, difficulties and future development of BRICS vary among respondents. There is, however, a shared perception that the organization has a long-term role in promoting an alternative and fairer system of international relations. Diplomats recognize the fact that BRICS countries have not yet achieved significant shifts in the way global governance is organized, with most international organizations representing an outdated balance of power between members. Creating alternative groupings and institutions is a tangible display of dissatisfaction over the existing system but none of these new structures have so far come close to dislodging the incumbent ones. The New Development Bank is not a rival of sufficient size to worry the IMF and their missions differ. Some respondents note that the goal of BRICS is incremental change rather than a toppling-over of current institutions, in which some BRICS members also have vested interests.

*'BRICS is mostly words, basically hot air, but changes in discourse lead down the line to changes in attitudes. There are few people who rule out the opinion of emerging countries when making decisions with international repercussions.'*

South African Diplomat, Interview 7

*'Russia and China have interests both in the existing system, reaping the benefits of their Permanent seats in the Security Council of the UN, and in a new system which would reduce the relative power of the United States. These countries have to be careful to avoid losing out.'*

Russian Diplomat, Interview 2

*'BRICS offers China legitimacy and shows the world that when it becomes the number one globally, it will respect other sovereign states.'*

Chinese Diplomat, Interview 10

*'We can't expect the current balance of power within BRICS to remain unchanged. BRICS membership may undergo modifications but the organization's goal will always be to contain global authoritarianism. BRICS is like a system of checks and balances!'*

Indian Diplomat, Interview 19

The research interest in BRICS correlates with the findings from the interviews that the organization still has a significant role to play in the international system. Even though scholarly interest in BRICS appears weak compared to other established international organizations, like the United Nations, it seems to be growing. The number of new expert articles dedicated to BRICS in Google Scholar has grown year on year for most of the previous decade, whereas research interest in the United Nations has sharply fallen, as reflected by the Table below. This research interest is not uniform, however, and it should be emphasized that the leading journals in International Relations which are all Western-based (for example the top ten journals as ranked by Scimago) index few articles, particularly recent ones, directly dedicated to BRICS as a grouping, and when the term BRICS is mentioned, it is typically to refer to its members in an abbreviated form, rather than to analyse their collaboration as something material. This might suggest that BRICS is a neglected (or even informally tabooed?) avenue of research among established Western scholars. This could stem from scepticism regarding the prospects of the organization or, more pertinently, the desire to shut down the discourse on the role BRICS countries could play as a whole to promote multipolarism. From a constructivist viewpoint, reducing the communication on BRICS de facto reduces the power that the grouping can exercise on the international stage.

**Table**

**Research interest in BRICS versus the United Nations as reflected by the number of new articles uploaded onto the Google Scholar during the calendar year**

Publication year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of new articles dedicated to BRICS	6 640	9 560	13 200	15 300	17 600	17 600	16 900	17 100	17 300	18 300	19 400	20 500
Number of new articles dedicated to the United Nations	544 000	488 000	548 000	584 000	536 000	504 000	434 000	383 000	374 000	293 000	191 000	108 000

Source: authors' compilation based on data extracted from Google Scholar

## Discussion

BRICS countries' vision calls for more democratic international relations and accentuated respect for sovereign equality. The above analysis suggests that there is no direct link between being a liberal democracy and applying liberal (live and let live) principles in foreign relations. Internal regime type would not be an effective variable to predict behavior on the international stage. This idea does not conflict with the principles of democratic peace according to which liberal democracies do not go to war with other liberal democracies. Instead, it underlines the messianic ambitions of liberal democracies and their readiness to resort to armed conflict in order to promote regime change and punish foreign leaders they believe to be responsible for various allegedly documented wrongdoings.

BRICS countries recognize and vocalize the threat, past and present, that liberal democracies pose to other states in the system. Countries like India have a special relationship with the UK and the US but do not have a clouded judgement when considering the capacity of the West to administer significant damage in places where they intervene. Russia remembers the rejection it faced when aspiring to join the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and the impact of Western influence during the 1990s, which led it to question the intentions of the United States on the world stage. China is engaged in a direct rivalry with the United States, with provocations culminating this year with the balloons shot down by the US and the country's stance on Taiwan. Brazil has a positive relationship with the West but resents the political meddling in its internal affairs, from the EU's assessment of its political candidates to the protectionist measures implemented by the bloc in the framework of its Green Deal on products imported from Brazil in order to promote sustainable development. The US's historical support for the apartheid regime is a thorn in the foot of South Africans who do not believe the superpower can have their interests at heart in spite of efforts made by the US to mend the relationship over the last few decades. So far, South Africa favours a non-aligned position and a multilateral approach such as the one promoted by BRICS.

The principles underlying BRICS are hence far from random and result from deep-seated resentment and conscious anti-Western sentiment but also the desire to see change effected in international relations. BRICS shows the road to a new type of solidarity, one that is not based on regime or culture similarities or even complementary economies, but on shared culture of international interaction. BRICS does not only exist to counterbalance the West; its mission lies in its ability to promote the values of sovereignty and equality and showcase them to other countries demonstrating that pluralism in international relations is real. It is not accidental in this light that important developing countries have clearly expressed their intention to join the grouping.

Indeed, the consistent behavior of BRICS countries over the last decade testifies to the resilience and viability of the organization, at least in the current geopolitical context. It is, however, possible that in time, inner conflicts may hinder the bloc's capacity to remain a unified political force. When and if China becomes the first economy globally by all measures, it may prefer to take on the United States singlehandedly to emphasize its new reinforced international role, rather than as part of a solidarity group. On the other hand, it could very well use BRICS as a support base to further its own interests for a legitimising coalition of satisfied states (in line with the power transition theory's tenets). The nature of the bloc would be significantly different from what it is now, however, and equality between members would likely be somewhat compromised.

The findings on the avoidance of conflictual issues in BRICS discussions can be perceived to be a stumbling block for the countries' cooperation as meaningful issues frequently are set aside and problems may not get solved. It can also be an advantage, as this ability to move beyond the problems to collaborate on other issues can be productive. The refusal to interfere in or comment on internal problems of member states is linked to the common understanding that inner problems in a country need to run their course and that effective political or social change has to emerge from within. BRICS position on the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine reflects this shared vision. The BRICS diplomatic politeness and avoidance of 'hard topics' can be contrasted with the way in which countries of the European Union fight out conflictive issues and wear their hearts on their sleeve. These organizations cannot and do not however pursue common objectives. Normative integration is not a goal for BRICS states that want to preserve their own identities, currencies and legal systems. Integration requires a geography related spill-over that BRICS countries will have difficulties to foster.

The future of BRICS is largely dependent on a given researcher's worldview. Realism suggests that BRICS is a temporary gathering of states that believe they can best defend their national interests by forming a group. Its

longevity would be directly dependent on the benefits it yields to each of its members. The organization would also be vulnerable to attempts of its members to seize power and possibly subjugate others. A liberal viewpoint would insist on the benefits of political and economic cooperation within BRICS and its ability to improve the rule of law and instigate international peace. A constructivist would point out that discourse can play a role in turning BRICS into a more significant entity than it originally was, with positive framing on the world stage helping the organization morph into a significant player and take on new commitments and missions.

It appears that states can gain in perceived prestige, status and arguably power on the international stage by forming alliances that involve no integration mechanisms and in no way affect member-states' sovereignty. The size, natural and human resources and power of the BRICS countries taken each separately suggest that in time the organization, if it were to remain united, could itself become 'a club of the powerful' in the international system. Further research could be conducted to determine whether a significant difference in growth rates would threaten in the medium to long term the unity of the bloc. Currently though, BRICS has shown itself capable of overcoming scepticism and remaining united through a global pandemic and a military conflict, both of which have been blamed on one of the organization's members. Regardless, other BRICS members remained conservative in their responses, showing the South the way to political neutrality and challenging the requests of the West to stigmatize BRICS allies.

## Conclusion

BRICS remains a relatively novel type of organization that is taking its time to lay down and consolidate its foundations and introduce and institutionalize practices to fulfil its various missions. The authors conducted a qualitative study based on 21 expert interviews with high-level diplomats from BRICS countries to determine how the commonly held values of its members have helped keep the bloc together and even establish its first permanent institution, the New Development Bank. The findings of this paper suggest that the absence of desire to evolve into a more uniform structure and make sacrifices to that effect should not be misinterpreted as a shortcoming of the BRICS but, rather, as one of the distinguishing traits which define the core of its identity and institutional design. Geographic distance, cultural and political differences and variations in economic and military power as well as size allow us to predict from the outset the natural limitations to the BRICS bloc's development. Nevertheless, its mission has been consistently worded in terms of advancing shared principles of conduct, or culture, on the international stage including the principle of sovereign equality of states under international law. While BRICS countries are different in-group, internationally they enjoy stark similarities and wish to convince the rest of the world that every state is an equal figure on the global chess board in terms of rights and obligations. In this sense, the paper concludes that while BRICS is not the appropriate format for deep integration, it nevertheless serves well its members' interests as they seek to promote different matters of common concern on the international stage.

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## Appendix

## Anonymized list of interviews

Interview number	Interview date	Gender	Place of work	Interview Language
1	21.01.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	Russian
2	27.01.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	Russian
3	02.02.2023	F	Foreign Ministry of Brazil	English
4	05.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	English
5	05.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Brazil	English
6	08.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of India	English
7	14.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of South Africa	English
8	15.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of South Africa	English
9	17.02.2023	F	Foreign Ministry of Brazil	English
10	20.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of China	English
11	23.02.2023	F	Foreign Ministry of China	English
12	25.02.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of China	English
13	25.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of China	English
14	02.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Brazil	English
15	03.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	English
16	08.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	English
17	09.03.2023	F	Foreign Ministry of India	English
18	10.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of India	English
19	12.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of India	English
20	18.03.2023	F	Foreign Ministry of South Africa	English
21	20.03.2023	M	Foreign Ministry of Russia	English

Source: authors