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Building a BRICS Identity: analysis from a constructivist perspective[1]

Construindo uma Identidade do BRICS: análise a partir da perspectiva construtivista

La Construcción de la Identidad de los BRICS: análisis desde una perspectiva constructivista

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Abstract

The BRICS is a complex phenomenon, marked by its internal heterogeneity. However, there is a collective identity that defines and influences the identities and interests of its members. The article analyzes this identity construction from the five original members, based on Wendt's (1999) four types of identity, as well as political, social, and economic data and its summit declarations. It concludes that the collective identity of the BRICS contributes to overcoming differences between members without imposing

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constraints on independent actions, even though these influence the consolidation of a collective identity and are influenced by it.

Keywords: BRICS, Types of Identity, Collective Identity, Constructivism, South-South Dialogue.

Resumo

O BRICS é um fenômeno complexo, marcado pela sua heterogeneidade interna. Contudo, há uma identidade coletiva que define e influencia as identidades e interesses de seus membros. O artigo analisa essa construção identitária a partir dos cinco membros originais, com base nos quatro tipos de identidade de Wendt (1999), além de dados políticos, sociais, econômicos e as declarações de cúpula. Concluí que a identidade coletiva do BRICS contribui para a superação de diferenças entre os membros sem impor constrangimentos a ações independentes — ainda que essas influenciem a consolidação de uma identidade coletiva e sejam influenciadas por ela.

Palavras-chave: BRICS, Tipos de Identidade, Identidade Coletiva, Construtivismo, Diálogo Sul-Sul.

Resumen

El BRICS es un fenómeno complejo, marcado por su heterogeneidad interna. Empero, existe una identidad colectiva que define e influye en las identidades e intereses de sus miembros. El artículo analiza esta construcción identitaria a partir de los cinco miembros originales, basándose en los cuatro tipos de identidad de Wendt (1999), datos políticos, sociales y económicos y declaraciones de sus cumbres. Concluye que la identidad colectiva de los BRICS contribuye a superar las diferencias entre los miembros sin imponer limitaciones a las acciones independientes, aunque éstas influyan en la consolidación de una identidad colectiva y se vean influidas por ella.

Palabras clave: BRICS, Tipos de Identidad, Identidad Colectiva, Constructivismo, Diálogo Sur-Sur.

Introduction

The BRICS, initially composed of Brazil, Russia, India and China, emerged from a proposal by Jim O'Neill (2001), then chief economist at Goldman Sachs. In 2006, on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), these four countries met to discuss issues on the international agenda, and in 2009, they formalised the format of Annual Summits of Heads of State and Government, which persists to this day. South Africa joined the group in 2011, thereby forming the five original BRICS members. Despite recurring criticisms of its heterogeneity, the BRICS marked its 15th anniversary in 2024 with the admission of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Iran. Indonesia joined in 2025, and a new category of partner members was introduced.

The literature on the BRICS oscillates between recognising its potential as a coalition and highlighting the challenges posed by its internal diversity (Stuenkel 2023; Daldegan and Carvalho 2022; Hooijmaaijers 2021). There is no consensus regarding its nature: while some scholars regard it as a limited cooperation forum due to divergent interests (Hooijmaaijers 2021), others emphasise its shared ambition to become "rule-makers" in global governance, even as its legitimacy as a representative of the Global South is contested (Duggan and Azalia 2020). Alternatively, a portion of the literature characterises the group as an informal institution whose flexibility and dynamism allow it to adapt to evolving agendas (Han and Papa 2024; Daldegan and Carvalho 2022; Cooper and Farooq 2015; Stuenkel 2012). Rinaldi (2021) suggests understanding the BRICS as a strategic alignment based on convergent interests, albeit without formal commitments or shared values, in line with Snyder's (1991) logic that a series of behavioural actions stems from the identification of common preferences among actors. One example of such convergence was the motivation behind the 2009 BRICS meeting, which responded directly to the 2008 global financial crisis by calling for reforms to global financial governance—particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) quota system—and for cooperative actions aimed at development, later reinforced through the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) (Daldegan, Perachi and Souza 2023; Daldegan and Borba 2023).

This article investigates the construction of a collective identity within the BRICS framework, understood as the result of its actions in promoting a fairer and more inclusive international order. Specifically, it (i) identifies the constitutive elements of the national identities of the five original members; (ii) analyses the

convergence of these elements in light of Wendt's (1999) typology of identity; and (iii) assesses the impact of this collective identity on the BRICS's international engagement. The article works with the hypothesis that the construction of a common identity enables the BRICS to overcome significant differences among its members, fostering a unified stance on strategic issues in the international agenda. To this end, Wendt's (1999) identity typology—corporate, type, role, and collective—is employed, alongside political, social and economic data and the BRICS annual summit declarations from 2009 to 2024, as compiled in the BRICS Docs repository (2024), with the aid of AntConc software.

The constructivist perspective, which holds that the identities and interests of agents are socially constructed through interaction, provides a valuable analytical framework for this discussion. From the constructivist viewpoint, states are socially constituted entities, and their interactions within the international system (IS) are capable of generating new identities and redefining interests (Wendt 1999). International relations are thus understood not only as material relations but fundamentally as social relations, in which the identities and interests of agents are simultaneously structuring and structured in an ongoing process of agent-structure co-constitution (Kratochwil 1989; Wendt 1992; Finnemore 1994). Accordingly, if the BRICS are embedded in a dynamic system of agent-structure co-constitution, their intra-group interactions inevitably (re)produce collective identities, reshape shared interests, and transform pre-existing ones.

Beyond this introduction, the article is structured in three further sections and concluding remarks. The following section discusses constructivism and its understandings of international relations. The third section deepens the discussion of constructivist concepts of identity and interest, particularly how these are constituted, while the fourth section applies Wendt's (1999) four identity types to the construction of BRICS identity. This article contributes to the field of Political Science and International Relations by advancing the understanding of the BRICS and the processes of interaction and identity and interest formation among international agents.

Constructivist in International Relations

Constructivism, which gained prominence in the field of International Relations following the end of the Cold War, holds that international reality is socially

constructed, with states' identities and interests shaped by beliefs, ideas, and norms (Wendt 1999). In contrast to neorealist rationalism, this approach maintains that agents and structures are co-constitutive: the structure reflects the distribution of ideas to which agents assign meaning, while agents simultaneously reproduce and transform these structures through interaction. Anarchy, therefore, is not an objective condition of the international system but a social construct shaped by state practices and perceptions (Wendt 1992).

Accordingly, the international structure is composed of three interdependent elements: material conditions, interests, and ideas (Wendt 1999). As these elements are intrinsically connected, changes to one alter the entire social system. Thus, norms, rules, and institutions play a central role in the constitution of states' identities and interests (Kratochwil 1989; Finnemore 1994). Through the internalisation of such norms, states not only constrain their behaviour but also redefine their interests and values, demonstrating that international practices are shaped by social and normative processes (Hopf 1998; Finnemore 1994).

Norms are, therefore, intersubjective and dependent upon collective acceptance and are consequently subject to ongoing contestation among agents. While such norms and rules have historical antecedents, their dissemination became a central feature of the international system, particularly after the Second World War with the proliferation of international organisations (IOs), multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, and others. The creation of IOs that seek to regulate state activity across diverse spheres—economic, environmental, health, and military, among others—and which are themselves constituted by states, gave rise to what is now commonly referred to as the multilateral system.

Multilateralism is an institutional form that organises relations among three or more states based on generalised principles of conduct (Ruggie 1992). For constructivists, such principles are not fixed but are the product of social interaction, created and transformed by the states themselves. As such, multilateralism reflects the dynamic relationship between agents and structure. Communities of states are sustained not only by affective bonds but also by intersubjective knowledge and shared identity, grounded in collective understandings and norms that are both generated and consolidated through institutions, whether newly formed or pre-existing (Adler 1997).

Ruggie (1992) argues that while collective identity is not equivalent to multilateralism, it provides an important foundation, particularly for international institutions, as it enhances the willingness to act upon principles and diffuse

reciprocity. For constructivists, it is collectivity that enables norms, principles, and rules to exert influence over agents' actions. This is because, although norms may persist even when contested, they lose their structural power to shape state behaviour if the majority cease to observe or apply them (Park 2023).

Collectivity can thus serve as a useful lens through which to characterise and analyse the BRICS. None of the propositions outlined above implies that collectivity requires uniform perceptions, objectives, interests, identities, or intentions. Multilateralism, norms, rules, principles, and even the universalism associated with the United Nations (UN) are not, in practice, fully consensual. While Glosny (2010) contends that BRICS members maintain closer ties with the United States than with each other, Duggan and Azalia (2020) argue that the grouping's efforts to reform the international order reflect the development of a common identity, which serves as the driving force behind the BRICS's engagement in global governance.

As agents within the international system, the identities of BRICS members are acquired through relations with other agents, both within and beyond the group, and form the basis for the construction of their interests. If BRICS operates within a co-constitutive system of agents and structures, its internal interactions inevitably generate new identities and interests while also reshaping pre-existing ones. The following section explores how such identities emerge and what they reveal about the agents' relations and the formulation of their interests.

The Construction and Formulation of Agents' Identities and Interests

States are social actors—entities to which identity and interests may be ascribed (Wendt 1999). However, such attributes are not given exogenously; rather, they are intersubjective and systemic (Wendt 1996). Moreover, in and of themselves, identity and interest are not immediately comprehensible—being is not the same as wanting, and one cannot know what one wants without knowing who one is (Wendt 1999).

From the constructivist perspective, identity refers to the understandings and expectations an agent holds about itself, acquired through participation in collective meaning-making (Wendt 1992). For Wendt (1992), identity is not only essential to the definition of interests but is also inherently relational; identities acquire meaning within a specific and socially constructed world. Thus, both

international and domestic environments shape state identities. Understanding identity is therefore an empirical task that cannot be separated from its normative, cultural, and institutional contexts.

One of the core contributions of the constructivist approach is the notion that a state's identity fundamentally shapes its preferences and actions. There is broad consensus among scholars that state identities are constructed within the social environment of international and domestic politics (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001). While Wendt (1992) assigns greater weight to the international environment, Katzenstein (1996) emphasises the significance of the domestic environment, particularly national ideologies. According to Katzenstein (1996), states' interests and strategies are shaped by political processes that generate behavioural patterns and are conditioned by their cultural-institutional contexts. The importance of this context lies in the role of historical change, which inevitably leaves a mark on state identity. He therefore argues that the processes of nation- and state-building—of constructing identity—have domestic roots that are projected internationally through interaction, setting actors apart from one another in terms of national ideologies and purposes (Katzenstein 1996).

Identities are essential both internationally and domestically for understanding international relations. A world devoid of identities would be chaotic; identities provide a minimum level of predictability and order (Hopf 1998). Hopf (2009) highlights different theoretical perspectives for understanding identity: from a social theory perspective, identity only becomes relevant in relation to others and is reproduced through interaction with them; from a cognitive theory standpoint, the pre-social need for identity is psychological; and from a structural theory perspective, an actor's identities cannot be recognised or accepted without being evaluated in relation to the prevailing social identities within a given community.

Identity thus serves three key functions in social interaction: it tells you who you are, tells others who you are, and informs you of who others are. Due to their subjective nature, identities are determined by shared meanings and interpretations. They rely both on a state's self-understanding and on how it is perceived by others. As Wendt (1996) argues, identities are ontologically bound to relations with other actors. Certain identifications, such as being "anti-communist", only make sense in relation to a defined counterpart, such as "communists". In short, identities are the outcome of both domestic and international interactions across various social contexts and are dynamic in nature, capable of evolving and transforming over time.

Interests, therefore, are a product of identity and cannot be assumed a priori, as rationalist theories would argue (Hopf 1998). States may indeed act selfishly in pursuit of their own interests, but this does not negate the fact that these interests are shaped within the broader dynamic of mutual agent–structure constitution. Interests, then, reflect the outcome of agents' identification processes—both individual and collective. This identification exists along a continuum ranging from negative to positive. At the negative extreme, the "Other" is perceived as a threat or in opposition to the "Self"; at the positive end, the other is seen as part of or an extension of the self. The position an agent occupies on this spectrum directly influences its actions and interests.

Wendt (1996) illustrates this idea by noting that a person might identify with a state such as the United States on matters of military defence while identifying with the planet on environmental issues. This instrumental view of the other is central to his conception of "self-interest": in the absence of positive identification, interests tend to be defined in isolation from others, driven by individual motivation. The nature of this identification—its strength and type—determines where the agent draws the boundaries of the self. These boundaries, in turn, shape how interests are defined and pursued and reveal that such interests are not fixed but are socially constructed through interaction and identification.

Norms and rules are also crucial in shaping states' interests. Within the dynamics of interaction in the IS, state interests are moulded within a normative context of widely accepted understandings about what is appropriate and desirable. This normative environment exerts influence not only on decision-makers but also on the broader public, who can either support or constrain policy action. As such norms, rules, and values evolve, they tend to bring about coordinated changes in states' interests and behaviour in the IS (Finnemore 1994).

Thus, while identity is fundamental to interests, it is also through the pursuit of interests that identities are preserved. Yet how can we analyse the identities and interests of states? Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) raise this question, noting the difficulty in defining state identities and the range of possible identities that might exist. They highlight Wendt's (1999) efforts to classify possible identity types within the IS. According to these authors, identity has become an expansive term that helps explain a wide range of actions, yet does not allow us to definitively predict that states with particular identities will behave in specific ways. This suggests that generalisations are difficult and that the number of potential

identities is infinite. Wendt (1999) identifies four types of identity, based on both internal and external interactions: corporate (or personal), type, role-based, and collective identity.

Corporate (or Personal) Identity

The first form of identity concerns the self-organised structure that defines agents as distinct units. In the case of individuals, this is grounded in the physical body; in the case of states, it is constituted by a body politic and territorial boundaries. Corporate identity is characterised by self-awareness and memory and exists independently of others, based on an internalised sense of "self" or ego. For states, this identity is grounded in domestic collective identities, a notion of "group self" (Wendt 1999, 225). In this sense, corporate identity can serve as a foundation for other identity forms.

Type Identity

Type identity refers to socially shared characteristics such as behavioural patterns, language, values, and culture. This implies that a single agent may assume multiple type identities. In the case of states, these may include regime types or political systems—capitalist states, fascist states, and so on. Although they are derived from shared features, type identities are still exogenous to interaction with others. Wendt (1999) notes, for instance, that Japan became a democracy after 1945 due to U.S. occupation, but this does not mean that its democratic system is identical to others.

Role Identity

Role identity is grounded in the position an agent occupies within a social structure. It is therefore relational and can only emerge in comparison to the Other. The ideas shared between agents may be either cooperative or conflictual, with the degree of interdependence playing a decisive role in shaping this identity. Role identity is thus contingent upon the structure of social relations in which the agent is embedded.

Collective Identity

Finally, collective identity may be understood as a synthesis of the previous forms, combining aspects of ego and alter in a relationship of shared belonging. It encompasses both role and type identities and has the causal capacity to induce actors to treat the well-being of others as integral to their own. Interests are thus calculated based on the group or collective to which the actor belongs.

Although collective identity entails a high degree of identification between "self" and "other"—a sense of "we"—it is important to acknowledge its limits. First, collective identities depend on the nature of the relationship between agents. Second, their behavioural implications vary depending on the purpose for which the identity was formed. Third, even when collective identity applies to a specific domain or issue area, tensions may still arise with egoistic identities, as full identification is rare and there is often a continuous tension between individual and collective dimensions.

It is precisely due to these limitations that Wendt (1999, 367) prefers the metaphor of "concentric circles of identification", emphasising a gradual variation according to the context. Identification with others depends on who the other is, what is at stake in the interaction, and whether one's own needs are being met. Wendt (1999) cautions, partially agreeing with realists, that there is a tendency for states to be egoistic. However, this does not preclude the possibility of accommodating collective interests. States may initially identify with others based on self-interest, but over time, such identification may become internalised, leading them to conceive of themselves as a "we" and to define themselves as part of a group. The European Union is a prominent example of this dynamic.

To speak of an international society governed by norms and rules implies that, as part of this society, states do not cooperate solely on the basis of cost–benefit calculations but also because they have internalised and identified with its values and norms (Wendt 1999). This is the essence of Wendt's (1999) social theory of international politics, which transfers established understandings of the social nature of human beings to state behaviour.

On the basis of these insights, it is possible to apply the constructivist approach and the concepts of identity and interest formation to the analysis of BRICS. Following the premise of concentric circles of identification, it is first necessary to distinguish within the group the notions of "self", "others", and "we". From

this analysis, we seek to understand the process of identity construction within the BRICS context.

The Construction of BRICS Identity

Based on Wendt's (1999) typology of identities, this section seeks to identify the existence of a collective identity within the BRICS—a sense of "we"—by analysing the constitutive notions of "self" and "other". To this end, Wendt's four types of identity—corporate (or personal), type, role-based, and collective—are revisited.

Table 1 summarises the analysis of these four types of identity through specific categories selected according to the data commonly used in studies on BRICS and the central themes of its agenda, as discussed in the group's annual summits. For corporate identity, data on territory, population, and economy are examined. For type identity, the nature of the political regime is assessed. Role identity is explored through the countries' positions in the IS, the IMF, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Finally, collective identity is assessed according to the vision BRICS members promote for the organisation of the IS, understood here as the catalytic element that underpins and drives their collective action.

Table 1: The Four Types of Identity According to Wendt (1999) Applied to BRICS Members

Types of Identity		Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Corporate (or Personal)	Territory/ Region	8.510.000 km² / South America	17.100.000 km²/ Europe; Asia	3.287.000 km²/ Asia	9.597.000 km²/ Asia	1.220.000 km²/ Africa
	Population	215.3 million (2022)	144.2 million (2022)	1.417 billion (2022)	1.412 billion (2022)	59.89 million (2022)
	Economy (Nominal GDP/ USD)	559.98 bi (2001) 1.67 tri (2009) 2.17 tri (2023)	306.6 bi (2001) 1.22 tri (2009) 2.02 tri (2023)	485.44 bi (2001) 1.34 tri (2009) 3.55 tri (2023)	1.34 tri (2001) 5.1 tri (2009) 17.79 tri (2023)	134.43 bi (2001) 458.2 bi (2011) 377.78 bi (2023)
Type	Political Regime Type	Democratic	Authoritarian	Democratic	Authoritarian	Democratic
Role	IS	Emerging/ Regional Power	Military Power	Emerging/ Regional/ Military Power	Emerging/ Regional/ Military/ Economic Power	Emerging/ Regional Power
	IMF Quota Share (%)	1,7% (2009) 2,3% (2025)	2,4% (2009) 2,7% (2025)	2.4% (2009) 2,7% (2025)	3,9% (2009) 6,4% (2025)	0,7% (2009) 0,6% (2025)
	UNSC	11 non-permanent member terms	Permanent member	8 non-permanent member terms	Permanent member	3 non-permanent member terms
Collective	Vision for World Order	Multipolar/ Multilateral	Multipolar/ Multilateral	Multipolar/ Multilateral	Multipolar/ Multilateral	Multipolar/ Multilateral

Source: Compiled by the authors using WB (2024) and IMF (2025) data.

Regarding corporate identities, the elements serve to identify the personal identity of each state in relation to the fundamental characteristics that constitute its corporate entity and how it projects itself to others. These are unique and determinative facts about each state's capabilities, referring to the "self" in an exogenous sense relative to the "other" (Wendt 1999). In terms of territory, BRICS countries are all territorially extensive and regionally prominent—Russia, China, and Brazil rank among the five largest countries globally[4]. India is the world's most populous country, followed by China (IBGE 2023), while South Africa is the second-largest economy on the African continent[5]. Each of these states occupies a strategic position within its region, a feature that forms part of its corporate identity and shapes its international projection. The comparative

4 Ranked 1st, 4th, and 5th respectively (IBGE 2023).

5 In 2023, the three largest nominal GDPs in Africa were recorded by Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria, according to World Bank data (WB 2024).

analysis of BRICS members' nominal GDP in 2001, 2009, and 2023 reveals different growth trajectories but generally indicates positive trends and dynamic economic transformation processes that reinforce their positions within the IS.

Differences in nominal GDP reflect the varying economic realities and strategies adopted by each member. Nonetheless, the strong growth observed between 2001 and 2009–2011 justified optimism surrounding the group's creation and the expectation that it could exert significant influence in the global economic order—as demonstrated by the group's prominent role within the G20 in response to the 2008 financial crisis. The crisis was a catalyst for the first BRIC Summit in 2009, where the group criticised the existing financial institutions and advocated for the G20 as a more representative forum than the G7. Since then, BRICS has consistently demanded greater participation for emerging economies in institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, calling for reforms to make them more inclusive and effective. Advocacy for financial governance reform, with a particular focus on the IMF, is a recurring theme in BRICS Summit declarations (Daldegan and Carvalho 2022). In light of the slow pace of such reforms, BRICS established the NDB and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) in 2014.

Turning to type identities, significant asymmetries exist among BRICS members regarding their political regimes. Regime type encompasses not only the technical organisation of government but also material structures such as institutions, agencies, hierarchies, and decision-making processes, as well as the set of ideas and images people associate with these structures, as Duverger (1968) notes. Hence, regime classification cannot be based solely on institutional form. While Russia adopts a semi-presidential system, it is widely characterised as authoritarian, as is China; in contrast, Brazil, India, and South Africa are considered democracies. These differences are frequently cited as potential obstacles to deeper cooperation within BRICS (Stuenkel 2023).

Politically and culturally, China and Russia share authoritarian features in their current regimes, which has facilitated their bilateral alignment in the 21st century (Ying 2018). Conversely, Brazil, India, and South Africa share democratic and liberal values and have deepened their ties through the IBSA Dialogue Forum since 2003, identifying themselves as "vibrant democracies" and emphasising their "democratic credentials", solidarity with the Global South, and commitment to South–South cooperation (Sidiropoulos 2013, 286). This divergence in type identity suggests that BRICS members promote distinct values and principles, which can give rise to divergent or even conflicting interests during decision-making

processes. However, thus far, such differences have not prevented cooperation within the group (Stuenkel 2023), although they may impose certain limitations.

This dynamic was evident in the case of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, in which BRICS members adopted neutral positions rather than condemning Russia (Júnior and Branco 2022). Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the BRICS (2014, § 44) advocated for "comprehensive dialogue, de-escalation of the conflict and restraint from all the actors involved [...] in full compliance with the UN Charter and universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms". This stance reflects BRICS's emphasis on peaceful and law-based approaches to global conflicts. In 2022, the conflict was addressed at the Beijing Summit, which expressed support for dialogue and reaffirmed the members' "national positions, as expressed in the appropriate fora, namely the UNSC and UNGA" (BRICS 2022, § 22). The reference to "national positions" illustrates how each country maintains its own stance. Overall, the group's declarations aim to avoid contentious issues—such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict or Sino-Indian tensions—thus preserving internal cohesion while underscoring their individuality.

From this type identity, which is socially rooted but still exogenous to interaction, emerges role identity, which depends on the existence of the "other". Three key sites of interaction are mobilised to analyse BRICS role identity: their positions in the IS, IMF, and UNSC (see Table 1).

In the IS, BRICS members—excluding Russia—see themselves as "outsiders" to the hegemonic power core. They are not part of the rule-making centre and project themselves as emerging actors within global affairs. This applies to Brazil, India, South Africa, and China. Russia, however, is widely considered an established power (Carmo 2011; Acharya 2014). While no longer a superpower like the Soviet Union, Russia retains a significant military arsenal that exerts influence in regional and global conflicts.

There is no consensus, however, regarding the classification of "emerging powers", with varying interpretations and criteria in the literature (Acharya 2014; Stuenkel 2012). China, in particular, occupies a controversial position. According to Carmo (2011, 8), China is "undeniably a great power in both economic and traditional political-military terms." Singh (2012) similarly argues that China's established status in the nuclear regime precludes its classification as an emerging power. A study by Bruton, Ahlstrom, and Chen (2021) analysing articles in Asian economic journals found that 28% describe China as either an emerging or transitional economy.

According to Li (2023), how China is perceived matters, but so does how it positions itself. China strategically adopts or rejects the label of emerging power depending on the context, as this classification can be contentious. Traditionally, it presents itself as a developing country allied with the broader Global South. Yet its rapid growth and assertive role in the IS lead other emerging and Western powers to view it as an established actor evading global responsibilities. Its identity must, therefore, align with national interests while adapting to external perceptions. To the United States, China is an emerging power; to other emerging states, a successful developing country. Thus, the term "emerging power" is best understood as denoting a recognition of "the growing economic as well as political and strategic status of a group of nations, most if not all of which were once categorised (and in some accounts still are) as part of the 'Third World' or 'Global South'" (Acharya 2014, 59). Recognising China as an emerging power does not preclude its status as an economic and military power—being the world's second-largest economy, the second-largest military spender, and possessing the largest navy (Li 2023; Shambaugh 2018).

Regarding the IMF, the 2015 implementation of reforms approved in 2010 increased BRICS influence. IMF voting power is based on quotas, which reflect a country's relative economic standing. The most significant change occurred with China's rise to third place among the largest quota holders, followed by Brazil (9th), India (7th), and Russia (8th). South Africa, the only member to experience a quota reduction, ranks 34th (IMF 2025). Despite these gains, voting power remains concentrated in the United States, which holds over 16.5% of total quotas. The limited impact of the IMF reforms reinforced BRICS's aspirations and contributed to the creation of the NDB and CRA as complementary mechanisms to traditional financial institutions, aimed at supporting development financing in the Global South (Daldegan and Borba 2023).

Regarding their role-based identity in the UNSC, China and Russia hold permanent seats, with veto power over binding resolutions on peace and security matters. Elections for non-permanent members take place via candidatures and voting in the UNGA, which underscores the relevance of Brazil and India, given their repeated membership in the Council. Advocating for multilateralism, sovereignty, non-intervention and non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for international law, all BRICS Summit Declarations stress the centrality of the UN in the multilateral system. From 2011 onwards, this position expanded to include demands for UNSC reform—coinciding with the unprecedented scenario in

which all BRICS countries simultaneously held seats on the Council. Within this context, Brazil, India, and South Africa have consistently expressed aspirations to become permanent members. Consequently, reform of the UNSC and matters of international peace and security have become recurrent items on the Summit agenda. In 2023, amid the BRICS Plus enlargement negotiations, the tone of the declaration shifted, clearly expressing the claim of Brazil, India, and South Africa for permanent seats in the UNSC, alongside explicit support from China and Russia: "We support a comprehensive reform of the UN [...] including Brazil, India and South Africa, to play a greater role in international affairs, in particular in the United Nations, including its Security Council" (BRICS 2023, § 7).

The collective identity of the BRICS arises from the synthesis of individual identities, representing the moment at which the members perceive the "self" as part of a collective functioning, grounded in the defence of strengthened multilateralism and a fairer and more inclusive international order. Despite prior divergences, all members share this common vision, enabling them to overcome heterogeneity through a gradual process of identification. As a result, States tend to internalise collective interests as extensions of their national interests. This collective identity, centred on the promotion of a multipolar world order and a reformed multilateralism, constitutes the principal explanatory factor behind the BRICS's evolution towards a broader and increasingly consensual agenda. It is this shared vision that enabled consensus on responses to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the creation of the NDB and the CRA, and the preference for the G20 over the G7 as the central forum for global economic governance.

Thus, even though the BRICS countries may express divergent or even self-interested identities and interests, it is through a process of collective identification that their interactions shape and influence the individual identities and interests of their members. The group has moved from initial scepticism about its relevance to a current phase characterised by the expansion of membership, the consolidation of its own institutions, and a deepening of its thematic agenda. BRICS Summit Declarations constitute the primary source for examining the group's discussions, positions, and actions in the international arena, as they express the consensus achieved and reflect the negotiation of interests among members since the group's inception (Daldegan and Carvalho 2022). Held under a rotating presidency, these summits clearly illustrate the expansion of the BRICS agenda over the years, incorporating an increasingly diverse set of themes aligned with both national strategic priorities and the broader international context of each historical moment.

Table 2. Presidency, Themes and Frequently Used Terms in BRICS Summits, 2009–2024

Year	Presidency	Theme	Frequently Used Terms #5
2009	Russia	-	International; Countries; Development; Cooperation; Energy.
2010	Brazil	-	Countries; International; Cooperation; World; Development.
2011	China	Broad Vision, Shared Prosperity	Cooperation; International; Development; BRICS; Support.
2012	India	BRICS Partnership for Global Stability, Security and Prosperity	Development; Global; BRICS; Countries; International.
2013	South Africa	BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation	Development; International; BRICS; Countries; Africa.
2014	Brazil	Inclusive Growth: Sustainable Solutions	Development; BRICS; Cooperation; International; UN.
2015	Russia	BRICS Partnership – a Powerful Factor of Global Development	BRICS; International; Cooperation; Countries; Development.
2016	India	Building Responsive, Inclusive and Collective Solutions	BRICS; Cooperation; Development; International; Countries.
2017	China	BRICS: Stronger Partnership for a Brighter Future	BRICS; Cooperation; Development; International; Countries.
2018	South Africa	BRICS in Africa: Collaboration for Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity in the 4th Industrial Revolution	BRICS; Cooperation; Development; International; Security.
2019	Brazil	BRICS: Economic Growth for an Innovative Future	BRICS; Cooperation; Welcome; Including; Countries.
2020	Russia	BRICS Partnership for Global Stability, Shared Security and Innovative Growth	BRICS; Cooperation; International; Countries; Including.
2021	India	BRICS @ 15: Intra-BRICS Cooperation for Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus	BRICS; Cooperation; International; Including; Countries.
2022	China	Foster High-quality BRICS Partnership, Usher in a New Era for Global Development	BRICS; Cooperation; Development; Countries; International.
2023	South Africa	BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism	BRICS; Countries; Cooperation; Development; Support.
2024	Russia	Strengthening Multilateralism for Fair Global Development and Security	BRICS; Cooperation; Development; Countries; Including.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The semantic tone of BRICS declarations has varied according to the national priorities of the country holding the rotating presidency (Barabanov 2025). This presidency holds the prerogative to set the agenda and define the annual theme. Table 2 demonstrates the influence of the rotating presidency in shaping the themes and identifying the most frequently used terms in declarations. Notwithstanding this variability, there is notable consistency in the annual recurrence of certain key concepts—most prominently "cooperation" and "development", which are central to the BRICS's identity and purpose.

The first two summits, under the Russian (2009) and Brazilian (2010) presidencies, did not formally adopt annual themes—a practice established by China in 2011 and followed in subsequent summits. Russia's inaugural summit signalled specific national interests; in 2009, "energy" appeared among the five most frequent terms, reflecting its strategic priority. In later presidencies, Russia consistently framed the "BRICS partnership" as a vehicle for global development and security, particularly in 2015 and 2020.

In 2014, Brazil's presidency reflected its foreign policy orientation, with "United Nations" featuring prominently among the top five terms, coinciding with the formal establishment of the NDB. However, its 2019 presidency shifted the emphasis to "economic growth" and "cooperation". The reduced mention of "development" reflects changes in Brazilian foreign policy, particularly under President Bolsonaro. During this period, both the president and his foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, adopted a critical stance towards multilateralism, significantly limiting dialogue with developing countries (Daldegan and Sousa 2021). Nonetheless, Brazil remained engaged in the BRICS, both for the international status it conferred and the importance of fellow members for its economy.

Since its first presidency in 2011, China has played a strategic role in consolidating BRICS identity and agenda (Zeng 2017), having introduced the practice of defining summit themes. In each of its presidencies, China has emphasised strengthening the group, with "BRICS" consistently among the most frequent terms and themes such as "shared prosperity", "brighter future", and a "new era for global development". Under its 2017 presidency, China also launched the BRICS Plus initiative and introduced the first formal discussions on enlargement.

In 2012, India brought attention to BRICS's role in global stability, security, and prosperity, which led to the inclusion of international conflicts—such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle East—in summit declarations. International

security, in its various dimensions, has since become a regular topic in BRICS summits. Moreover, this theme has spurred institutional adaptation in response to both internal tensions—such as Sino-Indian border conflicts—and external pressures, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine (Kirton and Larionova 2022).

South Africa, which joined BRICS in 2011, has clearly articulated its priorities by establishing a bridge between the group and the African continent. In 2013, under its presidency, countries outside the BRICS were invited for the first time, including African nations[6], reflected in "Africa" ranking among the top five terms that year. This practice has since been adopted by all subsequent host countries.

In general, the presidency enjoys considerable autonomy in setting the theme and agenda of the summit. The rotational nature of the presidency guarantees equal rights for all members to lead. However, while the final declarations may reflect national specificities, they do not reveal systematic divergence. On the contrary, there is notable thematic convergence, particularly from 2015 onwards, when the most frequently used terms began to display a degree of standardisation. According to Barabanov (2025), this is especially evident between 2022 and 2024, with the consolidation of the so-called "BRICS spirit". This phenomenon may be interpreted as a reflection of the process of interaction and identity formation within the BRICS.

Since the inaugural summit, shared values such as cooperation and development—rooted in the earlier-identified collective identity based on multilateralism and multipolarity—have been consistently reinforced. Table 2 illustrates how this collective identity has shaped shared values, ensuring substantial coherence between summit themes and frequently recurring terms. Thus, the collective identity of BRICS has gradually evolved through ongoing interaction among its members, shaping and being shaped by national identities, national interests, and the shared vision of the group. The individual identities of the States, while preserved, have become components of a common group identity, guiding the BRICS's agenda, cooperation, and international positioning. This trajectory confirms the constructivist view that interests and identities are not objective givens but are socially constructed and continually reconfigured through interaction—in this case, within the framework of BRICS.

6 Egypt, Guinea, Chad, Senegal, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, the Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Uganda, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, and Algeria (SAIIA 2014).

Conclusions

The analysis conducted partially confirms the hypothesis that the construction of a common identity enables BRICS to overcome significant differences among its members. However, the constitution of a unified front on strategic issues of the international agenda is not fully realised. The member states maintain autonomous foreign policies and perceive BRICS as an effective forum for cooperation—one grounded in consensus and devoid of constraints on independent action—even though such actions influence, and are influenced by, the consolidation of a collective identity.

The BRICS countries share a converging vision regarding the necessity of a multipolar order sustained by a renewed, fairer, and more representative multilateralism. This collective identity, as conceptualised within Wendt's constructivist framework, is not a given but emerges through ongoing interaction between the "self" and the "other" within the international social space. Although it may precede or transcend the formal creation of the BRICS, this identity provides cohesion and a sense of purpose to the grouping.

The analysis of identity formation highlights the relevance of the concentric circles of identification, following the typology proposed by Wendt. The group's collective identity functions as a mechanism for aligning interests and actions, despite facing limitations arising from tensions between individual and collective identities, the nature of relations among members, and the political purpose of the group itself. Since the first Summit, shared values such as cooperation and development have been observed, organised around a common vision anchored in multilateralism and multipolarity—both recurring elements in Summit Declarations.

Overcoming the heterogeneity of BRICS depends on a gradual and dense variation in identification among members, enabling collective interests to be progressively internalised as part of national interests. This process demonstrates that collective identity evolves through ongoing interaction, shaping and being shaped by the identities and interests of the states involved. From 2015 onwards, a relative consolidation of values has become evident, indicating that while national identities remain preserved, they have been integrated into a collective identity that guides the BRICS agenda, cooperation, and international positioning.

This collective identity provides a framework for understanding the evolution of the grouping and its international role. BRICS represents not only a relevant political and economic phenomenon but also a laboratory for understanding

international relations and the ways in which interactions, norms, values, interest exchanges, and cooperation practices shape state behaviour within the international system.

In this regard, rather than offering definitive conclusions, the article seeks to stimulate further inquiry. The ongoing expansion process—marked by the inclusion of new members as heterogeneous as the original five—tends to introduce new dynamics into the performance, identity, and interests of BRICS, thus opening new avenues for future research on the resilience and limits of its collective identity.

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