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The Dynamics of Informal Institutions and Counter-Hegemony: Introducing a BRICS Convergence Index

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The dynamics of informal institutions and counter-hegemony: introducing a BRICS Convergence Index

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Abstract

Informal institutions are important platforms for renegotiating global governance, but there is disagreement on how they operate and challenge the United States (US). Realists view some informal institutions like Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) as counter-hegemonic entities, while rational institutionalists focus on their structure and performance in specific areas. However, neither approach explains the internal dynamics that make these institutions robust and potentially counter-hegemonic. To fill this gap, we first develop a new convergence approach for analysing informal institutional dynamics, and then we apply this approach to examine BRICS robustness and BRICS–US relations. Our BRICS Convergence Index measures policy convergence of the BRICS states using a novel data set of BRICS cooperation on 47 policy issues between 2009 and 2021. Using data on US policy preferences on the same issues, we also identify the key sites of BRICS–US contestation. We find an overall increase in BRICS policy convergence and limited divergence from US preferences across a wide range of policy issues. However, since BRICS has engaged with more security issues after 2015 and substantively deepened its cooperation, its capability

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Correction (August 2023): Few textual corrections have been updated in the article.

to counter US influence has grown. Our convergence-focused analysis of informal institutions embraces members' agency and pathways for institution building, while identifying the issues that bind rival countries. As such, it helps explain how informal institutions gain robustness and provides empirical insights into the rise of new powers and global governance reform efforts.

Keywords

Informal institution, BRICS, global governance, United States, convergence, hegemony

Introduction

Contemporary global governance features rising competition among major powers. Major power tensions now permeate international security, trade, finance and climate negotiations and have become a prominent aspect of the larger crisis of multilateralism. The aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted debates about the emergence of new bloc politics and the probability of nuclear war. It has exposed collective action problems in global policymaking and major powers' vastly different approaches to global governance. For example, as the United States (US) and other G7 states have sought to isolate Russia following its invasion of Ukraine and limit its energy exports, the BRICS (Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa) countries largely abstained from condemning the Russian invasion, jointly criticized the use of sanctions and deepened their cooperation through various initiatives. As the Biden administration frames its extensive engagement with Ukraine as an effort to save the liberal world order, the BRICS group, the premier platform for changing global governance, has been pursuing a joint agenda to reform the multilateral system.¹

Since BRICS represents 41 percent of the world's population, 31.5 percent of global gross domestic product and 16 percent of global trade, its bargaining power is system-relevant (Heng, 2023). The BRICS group has undergone rapid institutionalization, achieved a high level of compliance with its commitments, built new institutions including its flagship New Development Bank (NDB) and created extensive multi-track networks (Kirton and Larionova, 2022). As a new power centre, it represents a potential 'critical mass' of countries that can alter global governance. In 2022, Algeria, Argentina and Iran applied to join BRICS, and nearly a dozen other states expressed interest in joining. Yet despite BRICS' surprising evolution, both the group's robustness as a negotiation platform and the main sites of contestation with the incumbent hegemon are understudied.

International Relations (IR) scholarship has established that the turn of states towards informal institutions such as G + groups and BRICS has become a broader phenomenon (e.g. Vabulas and Snidal, 2013, 2021; Westerwinter et al., 2021). States use these institutions to coordinate their policies without the constraints of formal treaties and secretariats, and treat them as the *modus operandi* in global governance (Roger, 2020). Informal institutions provide a vital space to renegotiate the terms and conditions of US hegemony and act as mediators of power shifts (Prantl, 2014; Vabulas and Snidal, 2020).

Yet, as Cooper (2022) elaborates, extant scholarship has been unable to account for the institutional dynamic of informal institutions, particularly BRICS, which is qualitatively different than other such groups.

Scholars are deeply divided on the nature of BRICS and its counter-hegemonic impact. Some, predominantly realists, see it as a mechanism which China and Russia use to balance against the threats of a unipolar order and respond to tensions in their bilateral relations with the US. Extant literature documents Russia's efforts to lead an anti-hegemonic bloc and analyses BRICS, as well as the RIC (Russia–India–China) and IBSA groups (India–Brazil–South Africa) as soft balancing instruments that target US unipolarity and the US-led global order (e.g. Ambrosio, 2005: 5; Bratersky and Kuttyrev, 2019; Chaulia, 2021; Flesmes, 2007). China and Russia's deepening partnership and increasing foreign policy coordination have fueled the adoption of 'new Cold War' rhetoric (Feng, 2022). Yet the problem with this line of analysis is that state-led informal groups operate by consensus and cooperate with incumbent institutions rather than pursuing explicit counter-hegemonic agendas.

Informal institutionalists either argue that BRICS' collective statecraft is system-changing or that it is a fallacy. The former note that BRICS has evolved despite major contradictions, border conflict between its members, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and a range of domestic political challenges, and that the establishment of its new institutions highlights the group's ability to mobilize and potentially create a parallel system of governance (Katada et al., 2017; Kring and Gallagher, 2019; Stuenkel, 2020). The latter perceive BRICS as a group of competing and ideologically divided states with mixed economic performance and limited impact beyond the financial realm of global governance (e.g. Hooijmaaijers, 2021; Pant, 2013). As such debates continue, our knowledge of the processes that cultivate states' engagement and facilitate internal consolidation is limited, and 'very little has been done first to understand what areas of strategic convergence are being harnessed to build functional intra-BRICS cooperation and what are areas that carry the potential for such' (Cooper et al., 2022; Kirton and Larionova, 2020; Zondi et al., 2022: 8).

Overall, the lack of conceptualization of the BRICS states' 'convergence' – in terms of both their adoption of shared policy preferences and the pathways through which they build this policy consensus – has limited our ability to evaluate the robustness of BRICS' mobilization and counter-hegemonic potential. Thus, this article asks: *How is BRICS converging across various issue areas? Do BRICS policy positions diverge or converge with those of the US?* To answer these questions, we propose a convergence-based approach to analyse informal institutions and empirically examine the processes that develop BRICS' internal cohesion. We examine BRICS convergence by combining BRICS-level institutional output, the processes of informal institution building including transnational communication among BRICS state and societal stakeholders, and the convergence of individual BRICS state policies at the sub-BRICS (quadrilateral, trilateral or bilateral) level. Our new BRICS Convergence Index uses an original data set of BRICS countries' cooperation on 47 policy issues between 2009 and 2021 (a total of 2,444 observations). Once we analyse BRICS' cooperation patterns over time using the Index, we compare the policy positions of the group and the US to determine the level of BRICS–US policy convergence in the same issue areas. Drawing on government

documents from both the BRICS countries and the US, this study provides new data-based insights into BRICS' robustness and the BRICS–US relationship. Besides capturing the overlooked institutional dynamic of BRICS and the issues that bind its members, the convergence approach also confronts the documented neglect of the views of the Global South in IR scholarship (e.g. Chidley, 2014). Namely, it starts from the BRICS countries' own framing of BRICS as a strategic partnership founded on issue-based convergence and examines the BRICS–US relationship in this context.

In terms of institutional dynamics, we demonstrate BRICS convergence in multiple policy areas beyond the NDB and especially in the area of industrial development. We find an overall increase in BRICS convergence and a deepening of BRICS cooperation, and after 2015, a growing focus on security issues. Russia's BRICS presidency in 2015 was a time of major institutional progress, because Russia significantly developed both transnational communications and sub-group collaborations. Overall, transnational communication is a statistically significant convergence pathway: it is positively associated with generating BRICS-level institutional output. Sub-group collaboration is not significantly correlated with output.

Regarding debates on counter-hegemony, we challenge the portrayal of BRICS by realist scholarship as a US rivalry-driven entity enabled by China's asymmetrical power. China's power does not enable it to dominate the group: China has been unable to advance its preferred trade agenda within BRICS and has not been the key champion of crucial institutional milestones. With respect to BRICS–US dynamics, having examined the policies of BRICS and the US on 47 issues in the fields of political economy, security, and sustainable development, we find that divergence between the two occurs in only a very limited number of issues. This was true even at the peak of BRICS–US divergence during the Trump administration. That said, BRICS is more likely to converge on issues where policy preferences diverge from the hegemon, and the more BRICS develops, the greater its capacity to present a counter-hegemonic challenge. There is also a trend of increasing convergence on security issues through intensifying transnational communication and sub-BRICS cooperation, including in the contested field of space policy.

Amid the rise of informal governance, this study demonstrates how informal institutions gain robustness, which extends ongoing debates about their durability and dynamics. While scholarship on emerging economies argues that their informal institutions like BRICS are development-focused and technical strategic partnerships, we show that their core institutional character (e.g. cooperation themes and stakeholder makeup) can rapidly evolve and become more security-oriented when an institutional member seeks to resist pressure from its key adversary. Prior scholarship has treated informal institutions as effective and flexible vehicles for managing power shifts, and BRICS has been an attractive advocacy platform for reforming global governance. As it gains robustness, states' perceived departure costs increase and may reinforce rather than ameliorate bloc politics. Thus, refocusing on issue-based negotiations can help reimagine global governance while avoiding further polarization. The availability of new data will promote further analysis of these developments.

The next section examines the literature on BRICS, informal institutional dynamics and counter-hegemony. We then introduce the analytical framework to examine the key

components of BRICS convergence, the novel data set and the Index. Next, we present our general empirical findings, followed by an analysis of the key convergence patterns. The final section discusses our theoretical contributions and envisions possible future uses of the BRICS data set.

BRICS convergence and counter-hegemonic potential

Some scholars have argued that the BRICS bloc of countries is system relevant, given the notable convergence of these countries' UN General Assembly (UNGA) votes across issues between 1992 and 2011, largely in parallel to the institutionalization of BRICS and IBSA summits (Binder and Payton, 2022: 391). This insight aligns with Ferdinand's (2014) finding of a high and growing degree of cohesion among the BRICS countries based on voting behaviour between 1974 and 2011. Yet Hooijmaaijers and Keukeleire's (2016) study of BRICS countries' votes between 2006 and 2014 did not find any systematic increase in voting cohesion since the start of the group's consultations in 2006. BRICS also did not co-sponsor a single UNGA resolution between 2011 and 2018, and only their cooperation on economic issues increased over time (Dijkhuizen and Onderco, 2019).

Unlike the BRICS countries' convergence in the UNGA, their convergence within the BRICS group starts with these states' explicitly shared expectations about institutional purpose and ability to find value in continuing their cooperation (e.g. Vabulas and Snidal, 2013). BRICS is a 'rising power group' – a group of states seeking global status that corresponds to their growing economic and geopolitical clout and their potential to act as rule-makers and norm-setters in global governance (Schoeman, 2015: 43; Mahrenbach, 2019). The BRICS countries engage in international policy coordination to ensure that the new global order is more pluralist with more diverse co-managers (De Coning et al., 2015) and that their aspirations are effectively accommodated (Paul, 2016). This effort to renegotiate their status in global governance is a long-term process, where the BRICS group serves as a negotiation platform. However, to be effective as such, the BRICS group's internal dynamics need to support its members' mobilization around common interests and enable the group to become robust and evolve. Yet, there is disagreement on the pathways through which BRICS evolves as a revisionist platform. We introduce and discuss the two prominent 'institutionalist' and 'rivalry' approaches below.

BRICS as an informal institution: intra-group dynamics as the missing link

Scholars examining self-standing informal institutions regularly link their durability to institutional design. For example, Vabulas and Snidal (2021) have studied institutions that feature recurrent meetings among high-level state representatives but are not legalized through a treaty and have no permanent secretariat (BRICS was included in their large-n database). They found that 'perhaps counterintuitively' such institutions are 'remarkably durable', although states could readily formalize or abandon them (Vabulas and Snidal, 2021: 859–860). Their relevance in serving as mediators of power shifts is based on the fact that they do not lock states into hard institutional arrangements (Vabulas and Snidal, 2020). Reflecting on G7, Bayne (1995: 494) argued that it was both an

‘institution and an anti-institution’, which ‘makes it hard to pin down, but it may be the secret of its survival’. The flexibility of such institutions, and their consensus-based decision-making that protects national authority, have been vital for enabling these institutions to adapt to political circumstances, become resilient and expand (Kirton and Larionova, 2022; Zürn et al., 2019: 376). Dense institutional networks have also contributed to their continuity. Much of the literature on self-standing informal institutions has focused on their institutional output as an indicator of whether they are more than ‘talk shops’ and can jointly act on policy problems. Thus, scholars either investigate members’ compliance with the previously agreed goals by comparing summit-to-summit outcomes (e.g. Kirton and Larionova, 2022) or examine the relevance of the joint output for the specific subfield of global governance where the institutional activity took place (e.g. BRICS or G20 impact on financial governance).

Yet the lack of understanding of *how* states that are challenging the status quo achieve convergence is problematic because BRICS and similar reform-focused institutions serve as *negotiation platforms that operate across various issue areas*. The fact that the BRICS group institutionally thrives despite the heterogeneity of its members, the India-China conflict, the lack of consensus on Ukraine, and the less institutionalised nature of its sub-groups (RIC and IBSA), reinforces the need to account for its internal dynamics. This requires an analysis of the key mechanisms/pathways for achieving internal policy convergence that make these institutions robust. This ‘process performance’ depends on achieving an internal consensus concerning institutional functions and policy issues, which then leads to the mobilization of resources and organizational efficiency (Gutner and Thompson, 2010: 231–232). For example, the rich G20 literature suggests that inter-bureaucratic communication, engagement with nongovernmental organizations and transparency to the media and to citizens are indicators of effective G20 process performance (Bayne, 2011; Hajnal, 2019). Naylor (2022) demonstrates that the G20 adopted some G7 practices of intimate engagement, informal exchange, consensus-based decision-making and outreach engagement with varied success, and that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for analysing G-summitry practices.

There is a growing recognition that extant scholarship on BRICS underestimates the critical importance of BRICS’ internal cohesion, which largely relies on the cooperation among BRICS countries regarding the issues and plans they have agreed upon to enhance functional cooperation (Zondi et al., 2022). According to Guerrero (2022), BRICS’ core institutional elements comprise its deliberation spaces, information system and institutional incentive system. Brosig (2021) explains how BRICS uses several pragmatic operating principles to manage inner-group tensions. However, BRICS scholarship still lacks an empirical account of the breadth and depth of BRICS convergence across issue areas. Yet, as Cooper et al. (2022) argued, examining ‘the institutional make-up and set of issues that bind (or do not bind) members together’ can grant IR scholars the predictive ability to gauge an informal institution’s durability in a more accurate fashion. Quantifying BRICS convergence can thus identify the issues that bind the BRICS states and where BRICS as a group has most negotiation leverage in its external relations. By examining US positions on the same issues, we can gain insight into how the group diverges from US policies. While prior scholarship categorized levels of US divergence from

individual rising power preferences – particularly those of China – the BRICS–US relationship has not been empirically analysed (Mazarr et al., 2018).

BRICS as a counter-hegemonic coalition: focus on rivalry

Scholars often frame BRICS as a collective soft balancing reaction to Western, particularly US, dominance in global governance (e.g. Lagutina, 2019: 446; Tella, 2017). There are historical, normative and performance-based reasons for rivalry-focused framing. Historically, BRICS has the promotion of multipolarity embedded in its mandate. Russia's RIC initiative that conceptually paved the way for BRICS was also a direct product of its dissatisfaction with US hegemony. Normatively, it has been established that the BRICS countries can articulate norms of sovereignty, trade, development and other aspects of international law, which are distinctive from and challenge US global agendas (e.g. Hopewell, 2017). Finally, rivalry narratives have also thrived as BRICS' collective performance has grown stronger, raising concerns about competitive institutional statecraft, with the group's launch of the NDB and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) being cases in point (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017; Katada et al., 2017).

Some developments question rivalry-focused arguments. First, while BRICS arguably challenges incumbent powers through soft balancing, it has had limited impact on the original target of soft balancing – aggressive US unilateral military policies (Pape, 2005: 10). Despite some coordination at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and non-isolation of Russia over its military actions in Ukraine, BRICS members lack full support for each other in UNSC reform and have no interest in a traditional alliance (e.g. Abdenur, 2017). BRICS' response to international security crises also varies with China and Russia adopting different approaches than other BRICS members (Brosig, 2019: 200). Yet even if we examine soft balancing as targeting US unipolarity more broadly, specific BRICS endeavours to this end, such as establishing an undersea cable or launching a credit rating agency, have failed (e.g. Helleiner and Wang, 2018).

The second concern with the rivalry framing is that among the five BRICS states, China and Russia are frequently portrayed as the most adversarial to US global leadership (e.g. Yoder, 2022), but whether they lead BRICS' counter-hegemonic mobilization is empirically unclear. China has been proactively changing global governance through its global development initiatives, and Russia has systematically developed a variety of instruments to undermine US hegemony (Allison, 2017; Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). Russia and China's strategic partnership has deepened over the past decade both as a bilateral endeavour and through BRICS and other minilateral formats (Kaczmarek, 2020). Russia's leadership has been essential for launching BRICS, and China's power advantage enabled it to influence other members to implement its global economic governance reform agenda (Hooijmaaijers, 2021; Katada et al., 2017). The US is already responding to BRICS by engaging 'like-minded states' to work around institutions within which BRICS can potentially block US initiatives (Viola, 2020). Vezirgiannidou (2013) frames US support for a permanent seat for India on the UNSC, but silence on one for Brazil, as partly reflecting an effort to 'split the BRICS' unity'. While BRICS–US divergence is discussed in some subfields of global governance, divergence patterns across issues are unclear.

Finally, a concern that permeates the field of informal institutions is that rivalry-focused approaches overlook non-Western agency and perspectives. As Zondi et al. (2022: 4–5) explain, portraying BRICS as a ‘Russia-China alliance plus’ undermines the view of BRICS being pro-something such as non-West-centred development, and it ‘presumes that Brazil, India and South Africa lack the ability to stand up to China and Russia, or at least they are willing accomplices to the machinations of the two’. Yet the BRICS countries perceive their alignment as a strategic partnership focused on issue-based and development-driven cooperation that seeks to remain ‘content-neutral’, rather than requiring a formal security treaty or a specific ideological orientation (Bagchi, 2020; BRICS, 2022; Chidley, 2014).

Overall, in addition to the competing theoretical views on BRICS, the extant literature faces a gap in understanding the BRICS states’ own approaches, and lacks large-n studies of BRICS’ convergence and BRICS–US cooperation. Our convergence-focused approach seeks to address these gaps.

Conceptualizing and measuring BRICS convergence and BRICS–US dynamics

This analysis of BRICS policy convergence and counter-hegemonic potential assumes that:

1. The BRICS countries conduct institutional bargaining to advance their issue-based interests and create mutual gains. Their agreements reflect convergence around shared policy preferences.
2. The evolution of informal institutions is an ongoing process of ‘convergence building’ occurring through various negotiation pathways. Greater group convergence creates greater counter-hegemonic potential.

To examine BRICS convergence and its implications for the US, we followed a three-step process. First, we created an analytical framework to examine convergence in informal institutions and developed a new BRICS Convergence Index. Second, we measured BRICS convergence across various issue areas using a novel data set of BRICS cooperation data between 2009, when the BRIC group issued its first leaders’ statement, and 2021. We employed descriptive statistics to analyse BRICS cooperation and test the hypotheses about the role of power and institutional dynamics. Then, to assess BRICS–US relationship, we introduced a new data set of US policy positions from 2009 to 2021. This data set is compared against the Index data to test if BRICS’ and US policies diverge.

Convergence building in informal institutions

The minimum condition for institutional formation is that its members can achieve a collective outcome through collaboration and can maintain at least one cooperation area over time. Parties can negotiate an ‘issue-specific institutional arrangement’ (Young, 2008: 15), such as BASIC, which was formed to promote policy coordination on climate change. They can also create a platform operating across multiple issues. Such platforms

can serve as ‘crisis committees’ or ‘steering committees’ for managing cross-border policy problems (Bradford and Lim, 2010). Once the initial agreement is reached, the parties sustain cooperation through post-agreement negotiations (Spector and Zartman, 2003). Institutional evolution then takes place through ‘layering’, as new institutional coordination mechanisms are developed in addition to existing ones, and through ‘conversion’ as existing institutions are given expanded and different functions and powers (Thatcher and Coen, 2008).

Convergence in informal institutions can happen through three pathways: policy harmonization at the group level, convergence among the group’s multiple stakeholders and convergence of individual state policies at the sub-group levels. In state-led institutions like BRICS, the most prominent pathway is through summits, where policy harmonization occurs. Summits produce communiques as key ‘outputs’ that reflect deliberations where group members reconstruct their interests or reorder policy priorities (e.g. Slaughter, 2015: 181; Kirton and Larionova, 2022). Thus, the content of *institutional output* is an important indicator of convergence as it demonstrates if policy harmonization is feasible. This group-level output reflects what negotiation scholarship considers an ‘at the table’ consensus, which is negotiated through supportive actions ‘away from the table’ that contribute to policy content generation (Lax and Sebenius, 2008). Institutionalists visualize this using an ‘iceberg’ metaphor that acknowledges ‘the substantial ongoing below-the-surface activity that gives support to the leaders’ *ensemble*’ (Alexandroff and Brean, 2015: 1).

In informal institutions such as G7/8, G20, BRICS and IBSA, states define the overall direction of cooperation, often using a rotating sequence of temporary presidencies or secretariats to set the agenda and host summits (Tallberg, 2010: 246). The BRICS chair is considered the ‘designated driver’ of BRICS: it has agenda-setting power, hosts the BRICS summit, is responsible for the outcome document, and organizes all other forms of cooperation. In such informal institutions, realist theories would expect that the most powerful state will ensure that policy convergence reflects its preferences, especially when it chairs the group. Thus, with respect to the role of power in BRICS cooperation, we hypothesize that *when a powerful state chairs the group, there will be high overall BRICS convergence on the issues this leading state prioritizes (H1)*. If H1 is true, China is likely to produce a high Index value on economic issues when chairing BRICS in 2011 and 2017.²

Transnational communication that connects these multiple stakeholders – in terms of both interstate bureaucratic information exchange and communication among governments and nongovernmental actors – increases prospects for policy convergence (e.g. Holzinger et al., 2008: 559). It is common practice in G + and rising power groups that states consult multiple stakeholders in the run-up to the summit, and that various groups are created to follow up on summit decisions. For example, think tanks augment policy dialogue by focusing the agenda and providing relevant research, which increases intergovernmental policy convergence (e.g. Luckhurst, 2019: 535). Overall, governance networks are ‘sustaining effective and legitimate summitry’ (Slaughter, 2015) and ‘shaping’ informal institutions through inclusivity practices and ‘hub’ creation (e.g. Luckhurst, 2019: 525). Capturing this convergence pathway requires investigating which actors and types of actors collaborate on governance concerning policy issues of interest (see also Raymond and DeNardis, 2015).

While informal institutionalism focuses on output and multi-stakeholder convergence pathways, another important aspect of convergence building is often overlooked: *sub-group convergence building*. Multilevel governance scholarship acknowledges that in addition to horizontal policymaking, states operate at and mobilize for optimal policymaking outcomes across different scales of interstate cooperation (e.g. Bache and Flinders, 2004: 4–5; Ongaro, 2015). This vertical policymaking dimension in informal groups involves sub-group governance arrangements, where states partnering around issues in smaller settings can venue shop to elevate policy implementation to the group level and achieve bargaining efficiencies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Multiple governance arrangements in the same issue area can not only facilitate the adoption of a group-level institutional policy, but they can also help institutional members manage complexity. For example, Nayyar (2016) observes that ‘BRICS as a formation began life on stepping-stones of bilateralism and building-blocks of plurilateralism’ and Kirton and Larionova (2022: 7) argue that ‘BRICS proved its value as a platform for facilitating its members’ bilateral relations and convergence in approaches’. Vazquez (2021: 534) adds that the ‘bi-lateralization’ of BRICS is crucial for its survival: it allows members to limit cooperation when their interests diverge and engage as a group when their interests converge. Thus, investigating shared policy adoption at sub-group levels complements other convergence pathways.

To examine how convergence around institutional output occurs, we hypothesize that *when BRICS adopts strong convergence building mechanisms (high transnational communication and high sub-BRICS intergovernmental collaboration), the group is more likely to achieve robust institutional output (H2)*. To summarize, an informal institution can thus progress towards the adoption of shared policy preferences using policy harmonization, multi-stakeholder policymaking and sub-group collaboration to build policy consensus. These pathways build its institutional core, increase its robustness and support its institutional evolution (see, for example, Campbell, 2009; Thatcher and Coen, 2008). Our new Index applies this conceptualization to the study of BRICS and measures its convergence.

Creating the BRICS Convergence Index and a novel BRICS data set

The BRICS Convergence Index (Index) measures *convergence of the BRICS countries’ national policies and the processes of convergence building*. It examines the degree of increasing or decreasing policy convergence over time across numerous policy issues. The three Index components – institutional output, transnational communication and sub-institutional (here sub-BRICS) intergovernmental collaboration – capture three distinct pathways for states to build policy convergence in informal institutions. Table 1 details the pathways and indicators in standardized percentages for each of the three components. The Supplemental Appendix comprises a detailed code book and the full list of policy issues.

The first Index component, *institutional output*, examines the generation of joint BRICS-level policy output on an issue, which indicates convergence of the BRICS countries’ national policies on that issue. It captures various types of outputs regarding each policy area in the observed year, ranging from the lowest value of no BRICS

Table 1. BRICS Convergence Index.

| <i>Convergence Pathway</i> | <i>Index Component</i> | <i>Implementation Question and Coding</i> |
|---|--|---|
| BRICS-level policy harmonization | Institutional Output | How robust is BRICS policy output on a specific policy issue? Coding (0–5 scale): 0=no BRICS statement/action on policy issue (component level 0%) 1=producing a joint leaders' statement (20%) 2=publishing an expert report, advisory report, or policy recommendations (40%) 3=publishing a joint action plan or convening working groups (60%) 4=concluding a binding agreement or treaty for policy cooperation (80%) 5=creating a formal institution to coordinate policies (100%) |
| Convergence among actors within BRICS (BRICS multi-stakeholderism) | Transnational Communication | Which types of actors are engaged and to what extent in BRICS cooperation on the policy issue? Coding: 0=No state official/societal involvement (component level 0%) 1=BRICS Leaders Meeting (33.33%) 1=BRICS Ministers or Equivalent Special Advisors Meeting (33.33%) 1=Societal/Track-II Actors Meeting (33.33%) Example: If all three BRICS actor types engage in transnational communication on an issue in a year, it is coded as 3=1+1+1 or 100% |
| Convergence of individual BRICS state policies at sub-BRICS levels (vertical convergence) | Sub-BRICS Inter-governmental Collaboration | Are states converging on policy issues through intra-BRICS agreements (bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral) outside BRICS structures? Coding (1–4 scale): 1=bilateral agreement (component level 25%) 2=more than one bilateral agreement (50%) 3=trilateral agreement (75%) 4=quadrilateral agreement (100%). |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

statements/action on the issue (0%) to the highest possible value (100 percent), which is BRICS' establishment of a formal institution for cooperation on the policy issue. If there are multiple outputs for a single-issue area in that year, the output with the highest value is recorded. *Transnational communication*, the second component, investigates which BRICS actors and types of actors collaborate on a policy issue. When all three types of actors (state leaders, government bureaucrats and societal actors) interact on a policy issue in 1 year, BRICS transnational communication is the highest value or 100 percent. When two, one or none of these actors are engaged that year, the levels of this component are 66 percent, 33 percent and 0 percent respectively. Finally, *sub-BRICS*

intergovernmental collaboration examines the convergence of individual BRICS state policies on an issue at the sub-BRICS level. It ranges from the lowest level when cooperation on an issue by a sub-group of BRICS is not observed (0 percent) to the existence of quadrilateral cooperation on the issue (100 percent). If there are multiple sub-groups engaging a single issue in that year, the largest sub-group value is recorded to capture the strongest sub-group each year and facilitate comparison.

The Index measures these three components on a sample of 47 policy issues that BRICS countries themselves identified as cooperation priorities. The framing of these issues stems from BRICS joint statements, which record the group's intention to cooperate on them. Selected issue areas include security, political economy and sustainable development. Our goal is to provide an initial sample of issues that are directly or indirectly relevant for US global leadership rather than an exhaustive list of issues (e.g. BRICS also has vibrant sports, educational and other cooperation) to trigger a new line of analysis that can better capture BRICS convergence in the counter-hegemonic context. Data sources for the Index consist of official declarations, statements and reports detailing policies and cooperation initiatives that were drawn from the websites of the BRICS member states as well as BRICS Information Centre and news outlets.

The Index calculates the mean of values for the three convergence components for one policy in 1 year and examines how it changes over time. Full convergence suggests a 100 percent policy consensus that would make BRICS robust. To achieve complete convergence in the institutional output component, BRICS would need to establish a new formal institution for policy coordination. The transnational communication component would show engagements by BRICS leaders, BRICS ministers or equivalent special advisors, and BRICS-focused societal actors. The sub-BRICS intergovernmental collaboration component would demonstrate evidence of quadrilateral cooperation.

To illustrate our coding, we offer an example of BRICS cooperation on space policy, Issue 32 'Support the China-Russia-Text Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT)' in our Index. We provide 2019 as a sample year. In 2019, BRICS increased BRICS-level policy harmonization via joint statements (BRICS Brazil, 2019a, 2019b) that supported the PPWT, so the institutional output was coded as 1 or 20 percent. Regarding transnational communication in 2019, BRICS actors' communication on the issue deepened through a leaders' meeting (BRICS Brazil, 2019a) and a ministers' meeting (BRICS Brazil, 2019b) that supported the PPWT, so this component was coded as 2 (from 1 + 1) or 66.66 percent. Finally, sub-BRICS collaboration in 2019 occurred via a trilateral communique of RIC Foreign Ministers that welcomed discussion on 'a legally binding instrument' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) China, 2019: para 14) for the PPWT, so it was coded as 3 or 75 percent. The Index value for 2019 was the mean of the three components or 53.89 percent. We followed the same process for each year from 2009 to 2021 and for each issue.

Measuring BRICS divergence from US policy preferences with data on US policies

An important application of the new Index data set is to examine the BRICS–US relationship and identify the key areas of policy contestation. Given the portrayal of BRICS

Table 2. Evaluating BRICS–US divergence.

| <i>BRICS–US Relationship</i> | <i>Implementation Question and Coding</i> |
|--|---|
| BRICS group-level policy (Institutional Output) vs US policy on the same issue | Do BRICS policy positions diverge from US policy positions? BRICS–US divergence level: 1 = Diverging policies (100%) 0 = Neutral/no policy (0%) –1 = Converging policies (–100%) |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

as a counter-hegemonic platform, we examine the *divergence between BRICS and US policy positions across the 47 issue areas and hypothesize that on the issues on which BRICS and the US constantly diverge, BRICS is more likely to achieve convergence (H3)*. Data on BRICS-level institutional output are used to track BRICS joint policies over time. We create an additional, US-focused data set documenting US policy regarding each of the same 47 policy issues from our BRICS data set during the same period. To examine whether the US government has a position on the specific BRICS issue, we consulted officials’ statements and other documents from relevant government websites detailing policy positions and actions, the US Congressional Research Service and media reports. Then, we examined whether BRICS policy in the observed year is similar to the US position in the policy issue areas. The range of outcomes is described in Table 2.

To provide a coding example for this component, we use the same Issue 32 (space security policy). In 2019, US diverged from BRICS policy regarding space and the PPWT, as determined from Yleem D.S. Poblete’s remarks at the Conference on Disarmament (US Department of State, 2019). This was coded as 1, and the component level was 100 percent.

To test H3, we explore the correlations between the levels of the BRICS–US divergence variable and two dependent variables – BRICS institutional output and the overall Index. We also test the correlations between a time-lagged BRICS–US divergence and the dependent variables. If H3 is confirmed, we expect that higher levels of BRICS–US divergence (in the year *n* or the year *n*–1) are associated with higher levels of the Index and institutional output.

Empirical findings

This section discusses the results derived from the application of the Index framework and its use to assess the US-BRICS relationship. Drawing on the new BRICS data set, we examine each of the three Index components and outline the issue areas with the greatest convergence per component in Table 3. Table 4 shows the results of the overall Index. All reported values are standardized percentages, representing the average value for that issue between 2009 and 2021. Finally, we use the Index data to test the introduced hypotheses.

The first Index component, *BRICS institutional output*, has steadily improved over the years with the average level of output increasing from 6 percent in 2009 to 48.6 percent

in 2021, indicating an overall deepening of BRICS cooperation. The highest-scoring BRICS institutional output occurs rarely as BRICS does not establish new formal institutions every year. Economic issues – such as building BRICS financial institutions and facilitating industrial development – have generated such high levels of institutional output. In addition to establishing the NDB, BRICS has also established the CRA, the Local Currency Bond and the Interbank Cooperation Mechanism. Notably, even for the top five issues under this component, the most common forms of institutional output are minister-level meetings, working groups and joint action plans. Interestingly, while converging around trade has been common in formal institution building, BRICS trade cooperation has been limited.

The *transnational communication within BRICS* component started from an average value of 13.8 percent in 2009 and increased to 93.7 percent in 2021. This increase is the highest among all three components of the Index, demonstrating that transnational communication among BRICS has become a key pillar of BRICS convergence. A factor analysis also shows that transnational communication is positively associated with BRICS institutional output ($r=0.66$ and significant at 99 percent level). Table 4 shows that overall, BRICS transnational communication is high on economic issues such as industrial development, intra-BRICS trade and support for the WTO. Important BRICS platforms for transnational communication on these issues include the BRICS Business Forum (became BRICS Business Council in 2013), BRICS Trade Fair and BRICS Think Tank Council (2017).

Sub-BRICS intergovernmental collaboration has fluctuated around the 30 percent to 50 percent levels from 2009 to 2021. This component of the Index is higher in 2010, 2015 and 2016 than in other years. Some frequently used platforms outside of BRICS include IBSA, RIC, BASIC (specifically active on climate change), as well as strategic partnerships between Russia and China, and between India and Russia. Sub-BRICS intergovernmental cooperation is also positively associated with BRICS institutional output ($r=0.09$ and significant at 95 percent level). Table 3 shows that sub-BRICS intergovernmental collaboration on climate change and on UNSC reform is the highest among all BRICS cooperation. It has reached over 90 percent on two climate change-related issue areas – strengthening global action on climate change through UN negotiations and supporting the Common but Differentiated Responsibilities Principle. Since Russia has been less aligned with the rest of the BRICS on these climate-related issues and other BRICS have a tradition of using the BASIC group for climate negotiations, it has been difficult for BRICS to speak with one voice on these issues. Similarly, IBSA rather than BRICS has been these countries' primary (and older) platform for UNSC reform discussions. Although the IBSA countries sought to address UNSC reform through BRICS, the slow pace of UNSC discussions in BRICS has reinforced the imperative of maintaining collaboration on this issue through IBSA.

BRICS Convergence Index

The Index is produced by first calculating the mean of values for the three components for one policy issue in 1 year. We then calculate the mean of these results for each year and examine how this summary measure changes over time. BRICS industrial

Table 3. Top five issues in each of the three Index components.

| Components | Rank | Issue |
|---|------|--|
| Institutional Output | 1 | Establish and strengthen BRICS financial institutions (56.92%) |
| | 2 | Promote industrial development within BRICS (53.85%) |
| | 3 | Enhance agriculture cooperation within BRICS (50.77%) |
| | 4 | Promote intra-BRICS cooperation to contribute to food security (46.15%) |
| | 5 | Cooperation on addressing global threats posed by communicable (including COVID-19) and non-communicable diseases (44.62%) |
| Transnational Communication | 1 | Promote industrial development within BRICS (87.18%) |
| | 2 | Promote intra-BRICS goods trade (82.05%) |
| | 2 | Support for UN development agenda (MDG and UN 2030 agenda/SDGs), urging developed countries to fulfil their ODA commitments (82.05%) |
| | 3 | Support the multilateral trade system and WTO / Support the WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism (76.92%) |
| | 3 | Enhance agriculture cooperation within BRICS (76.92%) |
| Sub-BRICS Intergovernmental Collaboration | 1 | Strengthen global action on climate change through UN negotiations and create a binding agreement (90.38%) |
| | 2 | Support common but differentiated responsibilities principle in climate negotiations and practice (86.54%) |
| | 3 | Reforming the UNSC and supporting Brazil, India and South Africa to play a greater role in the UN (69.23%) |
| | 4 | Support the UN system as the sole source of international law and centre for international dispute resolution (61.54%) |
| | 5 | Support the multilateral trade system and WTO / Support the WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism (59.62%) |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; UN: United Nations; UNSC: UN Security Council; WTO: World Trade Organization.

development is an issue area demonstrating the highest level of BRICS convergence. It has been on the group's agenda since 2009 and includes advancing industrial production capabilities, developing scientific cooperation and cutting-edge technologies, preparing for the fourth industrial revolution, and creating specific industrial development cooperation plans. BRICS has coordinated its cooperation on industrial development through working groups since 2011. Societal actors, such as enterprises, research institutes, and investment groups have been involved in this cooperation since 2012. Two sub-groups – IBSA and RIC – were also mobilized to promote industrial development. The BRICS countries have continued with convergence building on industrial development, which has led to a high overall Index score for this issue.

Figure 1 reports the average Index of all cooperation issues from 2009 to 2021. In 2009, the average Index across all 47 policy issues for BRIC was 14 percent.³ Since then, BRICS convergence building has occurred in two stages. The first stage from 2010 to 2014 features gradual Index growth from 15 percent to 30 percent. This stage is followed

Table 4. Top five issues in the overall Index.

| | Rank | Issues |
|-------------------|------|--|
| BRICS | 1 | Promote industrial development within BRICS (63.68%) |
| Convergence Index | 2 | Strengthen global action on climate change through UN negotiations and create a binding agreement (60.21%) |
| | 3 | Support common but differentiated responsibilities principle in climate negotiations and practice (58.08%) |
| | 4 | Enhance agriculture cooperation within BRICS (56.67%) |
| | 5 | Support for UN development agenda (MDG and UN 2030 agenda/SDGs), urging developed countries to fulfil their ODA commitments (55.94%) |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; UN: United Nations.

by a marked increase beginning with the 2015 BRICS summit, after which the Index has remained between 45 percent and 55 percent.

Power-based convergence? Testing Hypothesis 1

For H1 to be true, we should observe a high Index value on economic issues when China is chairing BRICS in 2011 and 2017. Informed by the structuring of issue areas in the ‘Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership 2025’, we divided our 47 issues into three categories: political economy, security, and sustainable development. We calculated and compared the overall Index and institutional output results in these three categories between 2009 and 2021.

Figure 2 reports these results as an annual average standardized percentage for each category. It shows that BRICS achieved the highest level of convergence and institutional output in their political economy cooperation in 2017 under China’s leadership. However, BRICS convergence and institutional output on political economy issues in 2011 was relatively low. Thus, Index data offers limited support for this realist-inspired hypothesis. Our analysis provides three insights into power dynamics in BRICS. First, less powerful states have actively contributed to BRICS cooperation on political economy and co-shaped this agenda. BRICS achieved high levels of convergence on political economy in 2014 (chaired by Brazil), 2015 (Russia) and 2021 (Russia). The most prominent BRICS accomplishment – the formation of the NDB – was initially proposed by India and launched under Brazilian leadership in 2014. Second, we observe that China has been unsuccessful in mobilizing others around its economic priority issue: advancing trade. For example, China proposed a BRICS Free Trade Zone (FTZ) at the 2011 BRICS Summit. However, other BRICS states have resisted this proposal, and as of 2022, the FTZ has not been established. China’s efforts to engage in sub-group collaborations with other BRICS states also did not yield much progress. Finally, China’s disproportionate power did not result in the continuous reinforcement of the political economy agenda; instead, BRICS made a major security turn, which other states championed.

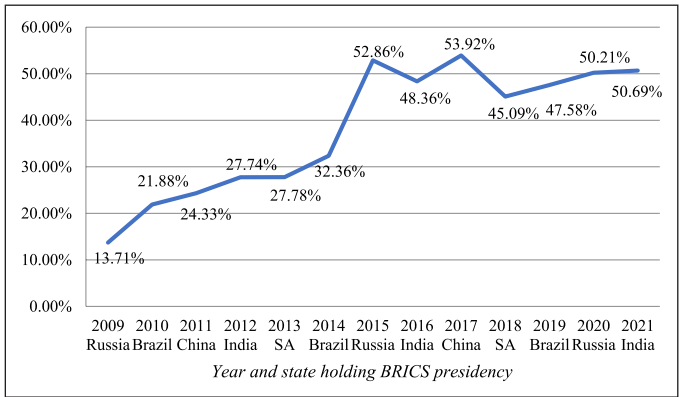


Figure 1. BRICS Convergence Index 2009–2021.

Convergence-building mechanisms and institutional output: testing Hypothesis 2

This section tests whether robust convergence-building processes, including high levels of transnational communication and sub-group collaboration, are associated with a high level of BRICS institutional output. If H2 is true, this means that convergence-building processes not only directly contribute to BRICS policy convergence but also promote the institutionalization of BRICS cooperation. We use yearly fixed effects to control variables that may affect BRICS institutional outputs. These control variables include the cultural and ideological discrepancy between the BRICS countries (Pant, 2013), BRICS’ revisionist intention (Chaulia, 2021), China’s economic/financial dominance in BRICS (Katada et al., 2017), and the stagnation in reforming incumbent international financial institutions (Kirton and Larionova, 2022). Table 5 reports the results from the panel data analysis.

Model 1 in Table 5 shows that transnational communication is positively associated with BRICS institutional output. Model 2 shows that transnational communication on a policy issue within 1 year before a BRICS summit is positively correlated to the values of the institutional output of that summit (significant at 95 percent level). This finding reinforces the importance of transnational communication for enabling BRICS members to share ideas, coordinate policies, and present proposals for discussion at BRICS summits. By contrast, the correlation between sub-BRICS collaboration and BRICS institutional output is not significant. This weak association shows not only the relative independence between these two components but also the need to examine all three Index components to understand how convergence may occur through one mechanism if others are not utilized.

States can also strategically build convergence to accelerate institutional change. As Figure 2 demonstrated, during Russia’s presidency in 2015, BRICS strengthened its convergence and institutional output in all three main categories of cooperation. Russia played a central role in these developments because it strengthened BRICS institutional

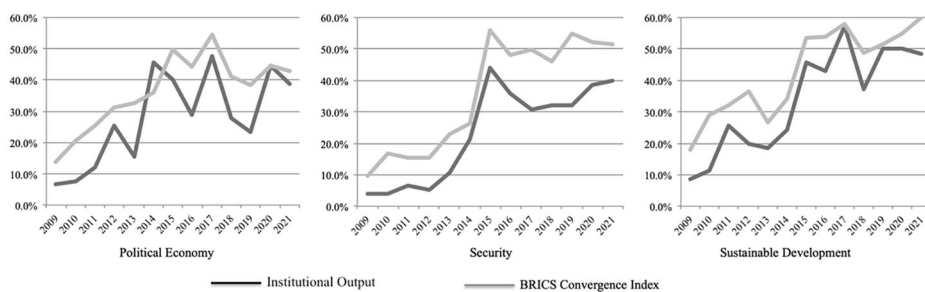


Figure 2. Comparing the Index and institutional output results in three categories.

output and enhanced transnational communication. First, with respect to institutional outputs, there was a proliferation of new BRICS working groups and joint action plans. The formation of working groups increased by 311 percent compared with the previous 2014 BRICS Fortaleza Summit. Second, the level of transnational communication increased from under 40 percent until 2014 to 72 percent in 2015, and has remained over 60 percent since then. In 2015, Russia successfully established the norm of deepening transnational communications within BRICS. Before 2015, BRICS transnational communication was mostly limited to state leaders and bureaucrats. In 2014, only three out of all 47 issues featured communication among all three types of actors (state leader, state bureaucrats, and societal actors). In 2015, twenty-eight policy issues involved communication among all three types of actors. Russia held the BRICS Civil Forum, which produced comprehensive policy recommendations for BRICS based on the input from over 500 civil society representatives from the BRICS countries (BRICS Russia, 2015). It also announced a detailed plan for societal cooperation under the BRICS Roadmap for Trade, Economic, and Investment Cooperation (United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) Russia, 2015: 2). The fact that Russia was facing sanctions from Western countries after the 2014 Crimea crisis can explain its ambition to strengthen BRICS: it had an incentive to pivot towards BRICS to reduce the pressure of sanctions.

Convergence towards counter-hegemony? Testing Hypothesis 3

To investigate whether BRICS is predominantly counter-hegemonic in its operations, we examine the level of similarity between US and BRICS policy positions. Our findings lend strong support to the hypothesis that BRICS is more likely to converge on issues where policy preferences diverge from the hegemon. We find that out of all 47 BRICS cooperation areas, the US has continuously expressed divergent interests in only four since 2009. The four issues consistently demonstrating BRICS divergence from US preferences are: regulating cross-border financial transactions and tax evasion, de-dollarization in intra-BRICS financial transactions, supporting India's proposed comprehensive convention on international counterterrorism at the UN, and strengthening BRICS energy security cooperation internationally. Among the 47 issues, US and BRICS policy positions have consistently converged in eight issue areas: promoting

Table 5. Convergence-building processes and BRICS institutional output.

| Dependent Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 (with lagged independent variables) |
|---|---|---|
| | BRICS Institutional Output in Year <i>n</i> | BRICS Institutional Output in Year <i>n</i> |
| Transnational Communication | 0.4651*** (0.0279) | 0.3812*** (0.0357) |
| Transnational Communication in Year <i>n</i> –1 | | 0.0243** (0.0121) |
| Transnational Communication in Year <i>n</i> –2 | | –0.0276 (0.0287) |
| Sub-group Collaboration | –0.0204 (0.0233) | –0.0067 (0.009) |
| Sub-group Collaboration in Year <i>n</i> –1 | | –0.0032 (0.0088) |
| Sub-group Collaboration in Year <i>n</i> –2 | | –0.0067 (0.0090) |
| Sigma_u | 0.0827 | 0.0978 |
| Sigma_e | 0.1860 | 0.1954 |
| Rho | 0.1649 | 0.2002 |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.
significance at 95 percent level; *significance at 99 percent level. Standard errors are reported in brackets. Panel data have 611 observations divided into 13 years and 47 balanced groups. Bold font indicates statistically significant values.

public-private partnerships, sharing information on hazardous international financial transactions (such as money laundering, terrorist financing and corruption), UNSC membership reform, WMD non-proliferation, African development, agriculture cooperation and food security, international cooperation in renewable energy, and controlling the spread of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

BRICS–US divergence has not been consistent over time. Figure 3 reports how the average US divergence/convergence with BRICS Index-measured preferences changes over the years. If the value is lower than 0, BRICS preferences converge overall with US preferences in that year. A value of –100 percent indicates that BRICS preferences in all 47 issue areas converge with US preferences. If the divergence score is higher than 0, it indicates that in that year BRICS preferences are overall divergent from US preferences.

Figure 3 shows that 2017 and 2021 were the years of change. Before 2017, BRICS overall interests converged with those of the US. However, since 2017, there is an overall divergence between US and BRICS policy preferences. Under President Trump’s leadership, the US adopted more competitive policies towards the BRICS members, transitioning from prior convergence to divergence on five issues: supporting the WTO mechanisms, supporting the WTO membership reform, supporting the UN development agenda, supporting a peacefully negotiated end to state-specific WMD non-proliferation (including Iran and North Korea cases), and strengthening global cooperation on climate change through UN negotiations. However, in 2021, the US changed its position on these five issues and shifted back to convergence with the BRICS.

Table 6 reports the panel data analyses of how divergent BRICS–US interests are associated with the Index and institutional output. Models 1 and 2 show that higher

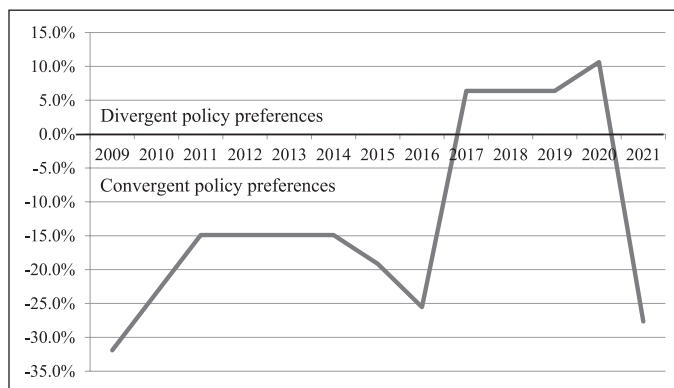


Figure 3. US divergent policy preferences from BRICS by year.

values of the Index and institutional output are associated with greater divergence between BRICS and the US. The time series results in Models 3 and 4 demonstrate a direction of causation: when BRICS diverges from US interests on a policy issue and this divergence persists for more than 1 year, BRICS is more likely to produce strong internal convergence and institutional output on that particular issue. This finding shows that BRICS has effectively built convergence and institutionalization, particularly on the issues where its interests diverge from those of the US.

Discussion

Prior scholarship has established that there is a lack of understanding of intra-group dynamics within informal institutions. It has also raised concerns with the application of output-focused rational design analysis to informal institutions. It used BRICS as an illustration of these problems. Indeed, the analytical perspectives dominating the theoretical debate on BRICS not only clash with one another, but also do not capture the essential features of the processes involved in BRICS convergence building. This has prevented us from assessing the group's institutional trajectory and its counter-hegemonic potential. This study directly addresses these concerns by conceptualizing *and measuring the process of convergence building*. Our framework started from the BRICS countries' own emphasis on issue-based cooperation, examined the three pathways through which the BRICS states build policy consensus, and extended the analysis to compare the adopted BRICS policy preferences with US policy preferences. The results of our analysis inform and advance the debates on the dynamics of informal institutions and informal institutions as instruments of counter-hegemony.

The dynamics of informal institutions: establishing a robust platform

BRICS institutionalization has been puzzling, and our convergence-based analysis speaks to the dynamics behind it. From an empirical perspective, full BRICS convergence

Table 6. BRICS institutional output, policy convergence and counter-hegemony.

| Dependent Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Institutional Output | Convergence Index | Institutional Output | Convergence Index |
| US-BRICS Divergence | 0.0605** (0.0232) | 0.0532** (0.0177) | 0.0133 (0.0194) | 0.0194 (0.0125) |
| US-BRICS Divergence Since the Previous Year | | | 0.0767*** (0.0181) | 0.0397** (0.0167) |
| Sigma_u | 0.1279 | 0.1457 | 0.1435 | 0.1517 |
| Sigma_e | 0.2442 | 0.2057 | 0.2415 | 0.1956 |
| Rho | 0.2152 | 0.3341 | 0.2611 | 0.3755 |

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.
Significance at 95 percent level; *significance at 99 percent level. Standard errors are reported in brackets. Panel data have 611 observations divided into 13 years and 47 balanced groups. Bold font indicates statistically significant values.

would require a full policy consensus across all issues, which is not observed. However, our analysis of BRICS activities on the key cooperation areas – political economy, security and sustainable development – and 47 policy issues between 2009 and 2021 demonstrates that BRICS is becoming systematically more robust over time. We find an overall increase in BRICS policy convergence and a deepening of BRICS cooperation across multiple issue areas. While the BRICS countries built some policy convergence prior to 2009/2010 as they pursued multipolarity, more voice in global institutions and a new approach to development, this factor alone does not explain the group’s rapid growth. BRICS has grown through the layering of new institutional coordination mechanisms on top of the existing ones. Yet this growth is nonlinear, as it features periods of accelerated functional conversion and thematic expansion. Functionally, BRICS expanded its powers through a major increase in multi-stakeholderism during Russia’s 2015 BRICS presidency. While prior scholarship highlighted Russia’s leadership in launching BRICS, we demonstrate that Russia championed the institutional growth spurt at a time of greater tensions with the US. Subsequent BRICS presidencies maintained this growth and further deepened this cooperation. Regarding the group’s thematic expansion, we observe the late start and rapid expansion of BRICS security cooperation in 2015.

Convergence pathways: how the BRICS states generate institutional output (H2). We demonstrate that once BRICS was founded, it has established a robust process of communication, while progressively deepening and expanding cooperation. Transnational communication is a statistically significant convergence pathway: it is positively associated with generating BRICS-level institutional output in the year after transnational communication occurs. However, sub-group collaboration does not have a significant correlation with BRICS-level institutional output. As BRICS’ intention to address

climate change demonstrates, the group has added climate to its portfolio despite the lack of consensus on the agenda and a separate BASIC climate coalition (BRICS-Russia) active in that space. Yet the high transnational communication score on climate demonstrates that BRICS can select a specific pathway not only as a result of their convergence on the issue, but also as a signal that they want to work out their differences regardless of the immediate impact of this cooperation on BRICS institutionalization. BRICS thus applies a ‘multi-speed’ integration model where some policy agendas with high institutional output scores build its robustness, and other agendas keep it at the ‘talk shop’ level until more transnational communication raises the bar.

Institutional dynamics of strategic partnerships. BRICS’ critics often argue that the BRICS members’ heterogeneity leads to cooperation difficulties. However, the institutional positioning of BRICS as a strategic partnership does not assume homogeneity. Instead, it requires the ability to partner around issues of interest. Our study reflects this view and offers a wealth of issue-based data identifying what ties BRICS together and how its members’ initial ambitions evolve. We observe path dependence, as the issue areas with high Index scores such as industrial development and agriculture have been relevant and systematically developed since the early days of BRICS cooperation. BRICS also demonstrated that it can rapidly develop institutional output in new issue areas and respond to crises – its COVID-2019 response is a case in point. In terms of BRICS thematic development, prior literature suggested that strategic partnerships such as BRICS were development-centred and that deep security cooperation was unlikely. While the Index confirms this broad orientation, it demonstrates that BRICS systematically develops its security dimension through transnational communication and sub-BRICS convergence pathways.

Finally, our findings raise questions about the framing of issues. We used BRICS’ own framing in BRICS joint statements and weighed the issues equally. Our top ranked BRICS cooperation issue – industrial development – is thus considered as its own issue area, and its broader scope makes it effective as a convergence magnet. Yet this finding also questions if convergence results may be affected by not assigning uniform parameters for the range of activities possible under each issue area, nor weighting their comparative relevance. However, scaling and weighting issues are necessarily subjective as each state has its own perception of issue relevance and disaggregation. Moreover, the initial framing of an issue can change. While intra-BRICS goods trade has a low Index value but high transnational communication value, transnational communication on this issue may have helped generate output in e-commerce or related areas.

Informal institutions and counter-hegemony

A rivalry-based approach to BRICS in the context of major power competition would highlight how US rivals engage with BRICS. While we already established Russia’s role in driving BRICS growth, we also investigated realist expectations about China’s power within BRICS and the group’s overall counter-hegemonic orientation.

Realist expectations about the impact of power in informal institutions (H1). While prior scholarship recognized China’s disproportionate power in BRICS, we show that other

BRICS states are able to resist significant parts of China's BRICS agenda. China's trade cooperation priorities that were clearly established and proposed to other BRICS members a decade ago are yet to be met. Although China has played a major role in advancing cooperation in the field of political economy during its 2017 BRICS presidency, other members have also assumed significant leadership roles throughout the evolution of this agenda. Both of these examples suggest greater mediation by smaller informal institutional members than is often expected in realist/rivalry-focused scholarship.

The extent of BRICS' counter-hegemony (H3). Our analysis clarifies the debate about BRICS as a counter-hegemonic group between 2009 and 2021 and establishes where BRICS and US policies converge/diverge. It demonstrates that BRICS is more likely to converge on issues where its policy preferences diverge from US policy positions. However, US–BRICS divergence is observed only on a small number of policy issues in our sample of 47 issues and peaks during the Trump administration. BRICS security cooperation issues are prominent among those in which the institution diverges from US policy preferences. While BRICS support for proposed China-Russia space arms control agreements and a UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism are long-standing areas of security policy divergence with US interests, the Trump administration also moved other security issues like centring the UN system in international security dispute resolution from prior BRICS convergence towards divergence. Finally, the policy issues where BRICS demonstrates greatest convergence – financial institutions in terms of institutional output or industrial development for the overall Index – are not explicitly counter-hegemonic, but can evolve in a counter-hegemonic way (e.g. BRICS promoting large-scale de-dollarization).

Overall, instead of labelling BRICS as counter-hegemonic, we need to distinguish among issues that attract the development of counter-hegemonic strategies. We should also investigate how such strategies are related to strategic cooperation on issues that lack this external positioning dimension. However, since BRICS is rapidly strengthening as a platform over time, its potential for soft balancing increases, and even the least counter-hegemonic states within BRICS become integrated into its infrastructure.

Conclusion and implications for future research

This article has sought to trigger a new line of convergence-based and empirically grounded analysis of informal institutions. Amid the rise of informal governance more generally, this study illuminates how self-standing informal institutions can gain robustness. It extends debates on their institutional durability and provides new insights into their understudied dynamics. While much of the literature on state-led plurilateralism focuses on the use of informal institutions to manage global problems like G + groups, BRICS' evolution is also affected by the fact that the group doubles as a platform for conducting negotiation campaigns to reform global governance. Its dominant institutional character (prioritized issues and stakeholder makeup) can change over time when some institutional members are under pressure and seek to accelerate reform advocacy. Furthermore, we question the idea of informal institutions as mediators of power shifts

because of their flexibility. As informal institutions seek to exert bargaining power, they become more robust as entities, and it is difficult for states to leave them despite their informality. This can encourage bloc behaviour rather than lead to a new major power consensus.

Future research can improve the proposed approach, and our original data set can be used to test various other hypotheses. Further disaggregating Index components (e.g. individually coding societal actors) and adding new issues can help more precisely track BRICS convergence building. Other promising areas for future research include: examining how different characteristics of state leadership and leadership changes relate to BRICS institutional development; analysing how issue champions develop cooperation and use issue linkages as well as how policy agendas travel among actors and across cooperation scales; and, investigating how interstate and institutional interactions outside of the formal BRICS context can affect convergence.

To extend our discussion of counter-hegemony, future research could further disaggregate US policy positions by using more elaborate coding to provide additional insights into institutionalized compromises resulting from contradictory political forces. Furthermore, adding EU policy data to the analysis could help capture BRICS' divergence from both US and EU and check whether the shifts in divergence we observe result mainly from US as opposed to BRICS policies.

Our analytical framework can be applied to investigate other informal institutions. This exercise can enable comparison of the dominant convergence pathways of these institutions and improve our understanding of internal institutional dynamics and performance variation. Potential new case studies could include IBSA and the Quad. Since IBSA's portfolio has shrunk with the growth of BRICS, comparing both institutions through the Index framework could help us better understand their evolutionary life cycles. Given the increasing tensions among major powers following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, future work can use our issue-based analysis to explore how to build bridges around these powers' mutual interests and avoid bigger confrontation.

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Availability of data and material/code availability

This article introduces a BRICS Convergence Index and develops a new data set. The coding guidelines are explained in the online Appendix, and the data files are available online.

Notes

1. See BRICS (2021) and Schwartz (2022). Although BRIC is often mentioned as an investment acronym, Brazil, Russia, India and China held their first stand-alone summit in 2009 to create a self-standing informal institution. They transformed into BRICS in 2010 when South Africa joined the group. BRIC(S) was initially launched as a dialogue and policy coordination platform to deepen cooperation in the interests of emerging market and developing countries. For an overview of BRICS cooperation areas, see BRICS (2022). See p. 4 regarding the treatment of BRICS as an informal institution and the platform to renegotiate global governance.
2. For Chinese officials' prioritization of economic issues in BRICS cooperation, see, for example, MFA China (2011) and MFA China (2017).
3. The values for 2009 and 2010 are for the BRIC states. Although South Africa formally joined BRIC in 2010, it became a full participating member in the renamed BRICS from 2011.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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