

A RATIONAL-FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH TO ANALYZING COOPERATION WITHIN THE BRICS FRAMEWORK: MULTIPOLARITY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF ITS POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

This article analyzes the approaches of rationalism and functionalism to assess the dynamics of cooperation between countries within the BRICS. Such an approach shows that states, as rational actors, enter into cooperation when they see tangible benefits from collective action, in particular, in satisfying common utility needs. Studying the BRICS system from the perspective of this approach requires an assessment of specific practical areas of cooperation, such as economic development, financial stability, and public health. In addition, this requires examining the extent to which the institutional mechanisms within the BRICS system sufficiently contribute to the achievement of common goals. However, in general, the rationalist perspective may not take into account the influence of ideological factors, power asymmetries, and domestic political considerations that shape the landscape of cooperation. Comparative analysis requires recognizing the obstacles of rationalism and functionalism in modern international relations. While the pursuit of mutual benefit is a powerful incentive for cooperation, it is necessary to assess the different levels of commitment and obstacles among the BRICS member states. Thus, this article is devoted to the proponents of calibrated utility rational functionalism, supplemented by ideas from constructivist and neorealist theories to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in BRICS cooperation. This multifaceted approach allows for a more accurate assessment of the viability and limitations of BRICS interstate cooperation.

Keywords: *international relations, functionalism, rationalism, interdependence, BRICS, ideological factors, global governance, multipolarity.*

Introduction

The BRICS group came together when the world was going through big changes and countries were shifting their power around. This group shows a wish among countries to build teamwork outside the usual Western-led systems. BRICS aims to offer

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different choices to places like the IMF and World Bank, which often miss the mark when it comes to what developing countries really need. Since the 2000s, these countries have stepped up as key players in the world economy, significantly contributing to production, trade, and investments abroad. China's contribution has really helped the group come across as more serious.

As the BRICS becomes more organized, economic and strategic issues are increasingly linked. This can be seen in the creation of groups like the New Development Bank (NDB), which wants to fund projects and encourage sustainable growth by using different ways of funding than the usual ones (Duggan, Ladines Azalia and Rewizorski 2021). The group is also talking more about things like technology, new ideas, and safety because of worries about energy and changes in factories. In their words, the leaders of the BRICS countries, specifically China's President Xi Jinping in recent meetings, keep announcing they prefer to make their team improved and work together to create a shared future.

This shows that the members are always trying to stick together, even when things are uncertain in the world. They are also changing how they work together to fit their own differences and how their economies are growing. So, even though the BRICS countries are working together in a world where there is competition and rivalry, their cooperation is based on shared money-making goals and political hopes for the future.

The fact that the BRICS members are so different makes it hard to use standard ways of studying their cooperation. Their differences in power, how developed their economies are, and what they want to achieve politically make people wonder if they can really work together without having similar interests. But, by focusing on the practical rewards of cooperation, we can see how these different countries keep their group active. This way of thinking says that countries work together when they find it benefits them, like with the New Development Bank and the Partner Innovation Center. These initiatives bring people together over shared goals, even if they don't all see eye to eye on politics.

To actually get a grasp of this teamwork, we've got to take a look at the authentic papers, what the companies are saying, and research on real initiatives. What human beings like Xi Jinping say indicates a common center of attention on what is practical. Looking at tasks like the Partnership initiative shows how working collectively can lead to real results even when there are deep-seated differences. This research also looks at how the BRICS nations interact with different nations, like their efforts with Laos, displaying their role in a world with multiple electricity facilities. Critical analyses of the electricity dynamics and problems within the BRICS crew add depth to the research. This team faces challenges like contention and unfairness; however, it is additionally looking for methods to build enhanced connections. So, through mixing up the legitimate stats with some imperative takes, we can get the full scoop on what's going on inside the BRICS crew and the challenges they're facing (Bastanifar, Khan and Koch 2025).

Theoretical foundations of rational-functionalism in the context of international relations

Rational-functionalism, in the field of international relations, is characterized by a set of fundamental principles that lay the foundations for a pragmatic understanding of cooperation between states within heterogeneous groups such as the BRICS framework. It is above all a theoretical paradigm that goes beyond purely idealistic or constructivist approaches by insisting on the utilitarian function of interactions and the instrumental rationality of the actors who compose them. This orientation favors the analysis of the concrete mechanisms by which states with disparate profiles manage to establish and maintain stable cooperation, despite manifest differences in political weight, economic capacities, or strategic interests.

The first key principle lies in the explicit recognition of the heterogeneity of the members as an inescapable structural datum. Rather than seeking to homogenize interests or identities, rational-functionalism postulates that cooperation is organized around a functional diversification, where each actor mobilizes his specific assets to meet shared needs at a sectoral or thematic level. This functional division of labor thus allows the creation of pragmatic synergies, in which asymmetries are not perceived solely as obstacles but become levers of complementary interdependence. The concrete examples observed within the BRICS, such as the industrial initiatives of the Partner Innovation Center, illustrate this approach where productive complementarity prevails over direct competition (MFA of the RF 2025). This approach transcends traditional antagonisms and transforms the initial disparity into a potential source of increased cooperation.

Secondly, instrumental rationality constitutes a central analytical foundation. Each member state, driven by a realistic desire to optimize relative gains, adopts behaviors oriented by the search for specific sectoral interests rather than by ideological or normative adherence to a common global vision. Rational-functionalism considers that this calculating rationality does not necessarily imply a constant conflict but can generate pragmatic arrangements, in particular through sectoral compromises or compensation mechanisms. The flexibility associated with this rationality makes it possible to manage tensions of interests and internal imbalances while maintaining a dynamic of cooperation. Thus, the current institutional discourses valuing “solidarity” within the BRICS above all translate into a pragmatic pact aimed at ensuring the functional viability of the group in a competitive international context (Men 2025).

The pragmatic recognition of power asymmetries and strategic divergences is an essential corollary. Rational-functionalism does not create the illusion of perfect equality between states, but on the contrary analyzes the way in which these asymmetries are institutionalized and managed through concerted arrangements or decentralized governance mechanisms. The resulting fragile balance is not fixed but is based on a constant functional negotiation between compromises and adjustments, thus perpetuating the sustainability of the partnership. This principle underlines the non-ideological but deeply tactical character of rational-functionalism in its ability to integrate the political reality of power relations in the service of a cooperative purpose.

In the continuity of the rigorous methodology already developed, which insists on the fine empirical analysis of discourses, institutions, and external interactions, these

key principles therefore form the basis for a coherent reading of cooperation within the BRICS. They show that the new theoretical framework is not limited to a static interpretation but highlights functional plasticity, practical instrumental rationality, and pragmatic management of asymmetries, all elements that contribute to explaining the persistence of the group despite its intrinsic diversity. In this way, rational-functionalism reveals that international cooperation, far from being simply the expression of identical interests, is built on the contrary by the skillful articulation of assumed differences and negotiated functional complementarities.

The analysis of cost-benefit calculations occupies a central place in the rational-functionalism understanding of cooperation between states, especially within a set as heterogeneous as the BRICS. In this context, each actor considers cooperation not as an end in itself, but as a means of instrumental optimization of his own interests, by careful arbitration between the expected benefits and the costs incurred. This rational calculation is based on a pragmatic assessment of the relative gains, which encompass both direct economic benefits (access to markets, capital, and technologies) and geopolitical benefits (strengthening of international stature and increased weight in global negotiations). Membership of the BRICS Group is therefore justified by the desire to maximize these sectoral benefits while mitigating the risks inherent in multilateral commitments, especially in a context of marked asymmetries and potential rivalries.

The dynamics of cooperation, in this perspective, emerge from a series of arbitrations where the member states evaluate the “opportunity costs” linked to their participation. For example, the commitment to initiatives such as the Partner Innovation Center reflects a collective desire to invest in industrial technological projects with high added value, the return on which is anticipated to be greater than the related sacrifices (sharing of sensitive data, punctual diplomatic concessions) (Stuenkel 2020). This logic explains why the BRICS often favor gradual sectoral cooperation, making it possible to narrow down commitments and guarantee sufficient flexibility in the face of changes in national or international contexts. This functional modularity, already mentioned, is thus also a way of limiting potential costs while capturing mutual contributions, thus optimizing the cost/benefit ratio for each member.

Another fundamental part of these calculations is based on the pragmatic management of asymmetries within the group. The most powerful states, such as China or Russia, can impose a certain agenda, but they also have an interest in maintaining cohesion by taking into account the capacities and expectations of less influential members. Therefore, the sharing of the costs of cooperation is calibrated in such a way as to preserve the functional balance, avoiding that states perceive their contribution as disproportionate to their expected gains. The interest of the whole in maintaining a credible coalition on the international scene thus encourages compensatory mechanisms and negotiated flexibilities, which moderate potential friction. This logic of balance by compromise ensures that the cost of a possible exclusion or disengagement is perceived as higher than that of cooperation, strengthening the stability of the group. In this sense, rivalry between states often gives way to strategic interdependence, produced from a pragmatic reading of mutual benefits.

Moreover, cost-benefit calculations transcend the internal framework of the BRICS to include interactions with other regional or international groups. The growing interest of countries such as Laos in interconnected partnerships with the BRICS via the AEU or the SCO illustrates this extension of the opportunities perceived by the Member States themselves, which benefit from an expanded network of functional cooperation (Hooijmaaijers 2021; Ayodele 2025). The international network thus diversifies and enriches the portfolio of possible gains while spreading the risks, in accordance with a rational approach to managing externalities arising from international relations. The pragmatic policy of openness, far from being a simple diplomatic display, responds to a calculated strategy of expanding tangible benefits in a global environment undergoing reconstruction.

The study of rational-functionalism applied to the BRICS cannot do without a thorough analysis of the institutional functions and cooperation mechanisms that structure this heterogeneous set. Indeed, the sustainability of cooperation, no matter the range of pastimes and the inequalities of power, relies mostly on the group's capability to institute frameworks and approaches that transcend the simple addition of individual countrywide interests, framing the relational complexity in a secure and evolving practical order.

First, the institutions within the BRICS play a central role in the formalization and law of interactions. Unlike conventional international organizations, often endowed with a binding legal architecture, the BRICS relies on a flexible but nevertheless robust institutional model, where the procedural arrangements define the rules of the cooperative game without threatening the sovereignty of the Member States. This flexibility embodies a form of "light institutionalization," which corresponds to the rationalist-functionalist logic: States adhere to mechanisms capable of maximizing their guaranteed minimum benefits while keeping room for maneuver to adjust to changing national contexts. For example, the multiplication of annual summits, thematic working groups, and ad hoc mechanisms promotes continuous monitoring and coherence of sectoral projects, reducing the uncertainties inherent in multilateral engagement (Zhou 2025; Papa and Han 2025). However, the rational-functionalist theory, though nice in illuminating sure factors of cooperation within the BRICS, cannot ignore intrinsic limits and internal criticisms that temper its explanatory power. These criticisms are all the more important because they highlight the conceptual and empirical tensions inherent in this approach, especially when it comes to accounting for the complex dynamics of a heterogeneous group where antagonisms of interests, asymmetries of power, and cultural divergences combine.

A first major limitation lies in the tendency of rational-functionalism to favor a functionalist and quasi-optimizing vision of interactions between states. This perspective assumes that the BRICS members act mainly according to an instrumental logic, seeking to maximize their mutual benefits or minimize their commitment costs by setting up appropriate institutional mechanisms. However, this hypothesis tries to grasp all the political, identity, and strategic factors that weigh in the choices of states. For example, Afro-Indian rivalries or Russian geopolitical concerns towards the West cannot easily be reduced to a simple functional rationality. These tensions reflect calculations that often go beyond the strictly functional sphere to integrate

considerations of power, prestige, or national security, often opposed to the idea of mutually advantageous and stable cooperation. Thus, rational-functionalism tends to underestimate the depth of latent conflicts and their potential to disrupt cooperative arrangements (Naik 2025).

Secondly, the institutional flexibility so praised in the structuring of the BRICS can paradoxically be a source of weaknesses, which goes against the current of the rationalist-functionalist conception valuing progressive stability. The absence of binding legal mechanisms and the adoption of a “light institutionalization” certainly favor the membership of the members but also expose the group to a lack of effectiveness. The voluntary and informal nature of the agreements makes their implementation dependent on the changing political wishes of the members, which generates structural fragility in the face of disappointments or differences of objectives. For example, the deadlines and resolutions of the summits are often adopted under the sign of minimal consensus, but their concrete translation into coordinated policies often remains limited. This institutional fluidity thus questions the ability of the BRICS to go beyond declarative cooperation to establish a truly integrated system, where the pooling of risks and gains would be highly restrictive and sustainable (Rodrigues Vieira 2025).

Operationalization of the rational-functionalist approach for the BRICS

The fine understanding of the national interests of the BRICS members constitutes an essential prerequisite for the operationalization of a rational-functionalist approach, which aims to explain the dynamics of cooperation within the group. Indeed, the socio-economic, political, and strategic diversity of the countries concerned—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—necessarily leads to a heterogeneity of expectations, priorities, and constraints that each state seeks to defend or promote. This plurality justifies first carrying out a rigorous identification of these interests before proposing a prioritization of them in order to grasp the adjustment and compromise mechanisms that underlie collective stability despite the disputes.

It would be reductive to consider that the interests of the BRICS members converge naturally or align around homogeneous functional objectives. On the contrary, this perspective forces a differentiated analysis of the specific motivations that condition the commitment of each actor. China, in particular, is asserting itself as the economic and financial engine of the group, seeking to strengthen its commercial relations and its foreign direct investments within the BRICS itself, emphasizing a priority interest in the development of an internal synergy conducive to growth. This orientation illustrates well the progressive integration of functional objectives into the cooperative dynamic, where utilitarian rationality triggers the creation of institutions and devices promoting intra-BRICS trade and investment (Chen 2025). However, this economic interest cannot be dissociated from Chinese geopolitical ambitions, which also wish to establish a regional and global leadership competitive vis-à-vis the Western powers.

At the same time, Russia highlights strategic concerns related to security and the reconfiguration of international balances, in particular in the face of perceived hostility from the West. This priority partly explains the country's ambivalent stance towards regionalism and functional cooperation, which can waver depending on geopolitical

conflicts, as illustrated by the recent war in Ukraine and its repercussions on intra-BRICS relations (Cochrane and Zaidan 2024). Russian pragmatism is expressed more by a political use of the group's institutions, combining minimal cooperation and the instrumentalization of mechanisms to strengthen its position on the international scene. Thus, its national interests relate less to a strictly functionalist logic than to a strategic dynamic, where the consideration of power relations predominates.

Brazil and South Africa, extra peripheral but strategically essential members, are specifically interested in the promotion of national socio-economic development and the affirmation of their respective roles in their regions. Brazil, which in the beginning contributed to the advent of the group, aims to give a boost to its affective capacities inside the global South, benefiting from accelerated economic cooperation whilst preserving its political autonomy. As for South Africa, it often insists on the need to integrate African regional issues within the BRICS agendas, advocating cooperation that goes beyond simple economic logic to include stability and development (de Carvalho, Anand and Naidu 2025). This highlights a plurality of horizons of expectations that transcend the functionalist sphere, including political, identity, and normative objectives. Moreover, the recently announced arrival of Argentina within the group illustrates a renewal of national interests likely to redefine the internal dynamics. This accession is motivated by the desire to enhance Argentina's place in the international order while seeking to diversify its economic partnerships in a context of prolonged internal crisis (Duggan, Hooijmaaijers, Rewizorski and Arapova 2021). This extension of the club testifies to the growing attractiveness of the BRICS but also to the complexity of the interests that the group will have to arbitrate to maintain sufficient cohesion.

The prioritization of these interests reveals a constant tension between, on the one hand, pressing national emergencies such as security, economic development, or internal political legitimacy and, on the other hand, more global collective objectives, such as the reform of global governance or the promotion of a multipolar order. This unstable coexistence often translates into a search for pragmatic compromises based on precarious balances, rather than on deep convergences. The rotation of the BRICS presidency, the flexibility of the agreements, and the modesty of the concrete commitments reflect this priority given to the management of differences, where each member tolerates a certain level of contradictions to preserve a space of interaction likely to generate partial mutual benefits (Ayodele 2025).

In contrast, South Africa is at one extreme of the power spectrum. Despite its symbolic status as an African leader and its political assets, its economic capabilities remain limited on a global scale, as does its relative diplomatic influence. This reality makes it a more dependent player, seeking to benefit from BRICS membership for knowledge, investment, and development cooperation, characterized by a significant military arsenal and substantial diplomatic potential, but based on a more fragile economy and reliance on energy exports. The current geopolitical conjuncture, in particular the impact of the war in Ukraine, accentuates Russian fragilities but also underlines the role of Moscow as a major strategic actor confronted with Western hostility (Nach and Ncwadi 2024). This duality manifests itself in a posture where Russia uses the BRICS as a lever to circumvent sanctions and strengthen its alternative

alliances while adopting a pragmatic approach to the institutionalization of cooperation. Thus, its power manifests itself more in the security and diplomatic field than in a strictly economic influence, illustrating that power asymmetries are not limited only to the material dimension but also affect the political and symbolic spheres.

Taking into account these structural asymmetries therefore invites us to go beyond a purely functionalist vision limited only to cooperation of mutual interest: relations within the BRICS are marked by a dialectic where relative power conditions the definition of priorities and modes of integration. Economic, military, and diplomatic capacities contribute to shaping implicit power relations, which direct interactions and possible concessions. This joins the criticisms addressed to the rational-functionalist approach, which, if it values the utilitarian logic and the progressive construction of cooperative blocks through functional interdependence, cannot obscure the factors of inequalities and the stakes of domination likely to hinder the sustainability of these processes.

Understanding the functional coordination mechanisms within the BRICS requires a thorough analysis of the institutional bodies and procedures that underlie the cooperative dynamics of the group. These mechanisms cannot be understood independently of the asymmetrical configuration of the powers, presented previously, which conditions both the modes of interaction and the formal devices put in place to organize cooperation. They thus embody the functional pillar through which the rational-functionalist approach manifests itself concretely, reflecting the pragmatic will of the Member States to overcome their differences by building spaces for consultation and collective action.

The BRICS rely on a series of institutional bodies with flexible but progressive functioning, corresponding to a moderate level of institutionalization, typical of emerging formations seeking to reconcile diversity and effectiveness. The annual summit of the heads of state and government, the supreme decision-making body, embodies the common political will and sets the main strategic orientations. However, this forum, by its small format and the consensual nature of its deliberations, reflects the complexity inherent in the management of a group with sometimes divergent interests and heightened sensitivity to national sovereignty. Unlike a formal organization with binding powers, the rotating presidency of the BRICS, assigned annually to each of the members, acts as a symbolic and practical lever of coordination, allowing each country to put forward its priorities while ensuring a temporary balance of influences (Wang, Zhang and Xi 2022). This rotation illustrates the need for leadership management by consensus, essential in a context marked by marked structural asymmetries.

Beyond the summit, a dense network of working groups and technical committees oversees specific cooperation in essential functional areas: economy, finance, trade, energy, security, sustainable development, and innovation. These operational spaces reflect the rationalist approach oriented towards the pragmatic resolution of common problems by promoting regular exchanges between experts and senior officials. They make it possible to capitalize on economic and technological complementarities—for example, financial cooperation is realized via institutions such as the New

Development Bank, a real shared institutional vector that illustrates the group's ability to create joint tools beyond simple political consultations. This institutional development, progressive but tangible, reflects a pragmatic adoption of functional procedures, which favor the creation of increasing interdependencies, a central pillar of rational-functionalism reasoning (Cheng 2015).

The consensual nature of the decision-making procedures is also a crucial aspect for understanding the sustainability of cooperation. While the group does not have binding mechanisms in the strict sense, decisions are taken unanimously, thus imposing a climate of mutual listening and compromise. This procedural model avoids polarization and prevents blockages linked to differences in national interests while preserving the sovereignty of the members. However, this procedural flexibility is also a potential limit, insofar as it can slow down decision-making and require strong internal diplomacy, particularly in light of the power imbalances outlined above. The ability to maintain an open dialogue and negotiate compromises between actors with asymmetric resources, such as China or Russia on the one hand, and members with narrower margins, such as South Africa, conditions the effectiveness and cohesion of the group (Belli and Jiang 2025).

Taking into account regional and cultural diversity appears to be an essential dimension to fully grasp the dynamics of cooperation within the BRICS, especially in light of the functional coordination mechanisms previously analyzed. This diversity, although it represents a potential source of tension, is also an essential vector for mutual enrichment and legitimization of cooperation, especially in a context where the differences in historical trajectories, development models, and identity representations are profound. The cultural and geographical complexity of the BRICS, which brings together countries from different continents—Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eurasia—implies a multiplicity of worldviews, political priorities, and modes of diplomatic interaction that cannot be ignored if we want to understand the sustainability of the group.

From a rationalist-functionalism point of view, this regional and cultural heterogeneity is not simply an obstacle to cooperation but constitutes a framework of constraints and opportunities that forces us to think about specific modes of coordination and adaptation. The explicit recognition of these differences, for example during annual summits or within working groups, allows not only the integration of diverse perspectives but also the stabilization of the whole by mitigating the risks of exclusion or cultural domination. Thus, the rotation of leadership within the group, mentioned above, does not only respond to a political logic of balance of power but also reflects a form of symbolic expression of regional and cultural diversities, giving each of the members a privileged moment to highlight their own issues and frames of reference (Mansour and Baiche 2025). This contributes to a dynamic of inclusion not only politically but also epistemologically, where each country can assert its identity in cooperation without being overwhelmed by a single hegemonic model.

Cultural diversity significantly influences the methods of communication and negotiation between members. BRICS diplomacy is characterized by a high degree of pragmatism and a preference for consensus, which can be interpreted as a functional adaptation to the coexistence of normative systems and distinct political approaches.

For example, the differences in diplomatic style between China, a centralized and hierarchical great power, and South Africa, which follows a multi-stakeholder tradition involving strong internal consultations, require continuous adjustments to avoid misunderstandings and foster an atmosphere of relative trust (Biba 2016). In this sense, the ability of the BRICS institutions to create a flexible framework, as shown by the technical consultation bodies and informal exchanges, makes it possible to translate these differences into resources rather than open conflicts.

The regional dimension also represents a key variable in the dynamics of cooperation. The integration of the BRICS within their respective geopolitical spaces influences their national strategies and their conception of international cooperation. M. Telo highlights how Russia, faced with significant geopolitical tensions in its immediate region, adopts an ambivalent posture vis-à-vis regionalism in connection with its BRICS partners, oscillating between pragmatic cooperation and power strategy (Macías 2025). This regional complexity is also found in the case of Argentina, which, by joining the BRICS, seeks to strengthen its regional position in Latin America while inserting its particular interests into a broader global architecture. The partnership between members from such varied regional backgrounds imposes on the BRICS a delicate balance between intrastate regional cooperation, where trust and interests are sometimes more homogeneous, and interregional cooperation, where the search for compromises and the recognition of pluralism dominate.

In this regard, the leading role of China illustrates well this dialectic between diversity and functional pragmatism. By its increasing economic weight, it exerts a decisive influence on commercial exchanges and intra-BRICS investment flows, while promoting initiatives that respect national singularities to create a network of effective interdependencies (Süsler 2025). This posture underlines the importance of a fine-grained approach, sensitive to local contexts, which complements the purely functional logic of cooperative mechanisms. The ability of the BRICS to adapt to the cultural and regional specificities of their members by avoiding in particular the temptations of normative or institutional standardization is therefore essential to maintain a balance between necessary convergence and respect for the constituent diversity of the group.

Analysis of the emergence and sustainability of cooperation within the BRICS

The emergence of an initial convergence of economic and geostrategic interests within the BRICS can be understood as the *sine qua non* condition that allowed the crystallization of cooperation beyond simple intercultural and regional dialogues. This point of convergence, although partial and circumstantial, constitutes a powerful engine explaining, according to a rational-functionalist approach, the activation of a functional framework of cooperation based on the mutual recognition of shared advantages. The manifest heterogeneity of the group, previously analyzed from a cultural and regional perspective, therefore does not neutralize the existence of structuring convergent interests, which, while coexisting with divergences, have favored the implementation of pragmatic and sustainable cooperative mechanisms.

On the economic level, the BRICS first constituted a collective response to the domination of a world order largely impregnated by institutions and regulations perceived as inherited or controlled by the former Western powers. This common

posture reflects a shared strategic interest in reshaping the global economic power relations, in particular through the development of alternative trade channels, the diversification of investment sources, and the promotion of large-scale infrastructure projects. The coordination around so-called “strategic” sectors illustrates this point: each of the members, despite distinct national priorities, embodies a specific sectoral capacity which, integrated into a complementary logic, aims to build an interconnected economic network, thus mitigating their individual vulnerability to external shocks and potential economic sanctions (Esteves and Coelho 2025). This growing economic interdependence feeds a rational calculation by which the member states perceive a tangible benefit linked to cooperation, which proves to be an essential vector of sustainability.

On a geostrategic register, the initial convergence is captured in the shared desire to assert an increased strategic weight in global governance. This is not a formal coalition aimed at challenging an established order head-on, but rather a cautious pragmatic assembly that seeks to create new balances, especially in a context of global and multipolar tensions. The ambition of the BRICS is not only economic; it is also reflected in a diplomatic posture aimed at enrolling their interests in renewed multilateral forums through a more representative and less hegemonic global economic governance. This pragmatic will is expressed in initiatives such as the New Development Bank (NDB) or the BRICS Cooperation Alliance, where ideal instruments are embodied to translate functional convergences into concrete actions. These devices are designed to meet both economic development challenges and geopolitical needs, allowing members to secure their national projects in a logic of structured interdependence (Müller 2025).

It should be emphasized that this initial convergence is also based on a rational reading of the mutual benefits and the costs associated with too marked a divergence. Thus, even if the strategic interests remain partially divergent, in particular due to regional rivalries or national hegemonic aspirations, the effectiveness of functional cooperation requires the pragmatic recognition that the refusal to engage in direct confrontation offers a framework for peaceful interactions, favoring economic and diplomatic cooperation. This dialectic of cooperation and competition, often described as “unlikely but necessary cooperation” in a context of increasing economic interdependencies, reflects a complex reality where instrumental rationality encourages overcoming tensions to take advantage of common opportunities (Omoigberale 2025).

The need to resort to ad hoc institutions within the BRICS is part of the logical continuity of the initial convergence of economic and geostrategic interests, which, although essential, is not enough by itself to guarantee the sustainability and stability of cooperation. Indeed, faced with the profound heterogeneity of the group's members, whether related to their economic capabilities, their geopolitical profiles, or their national priorities, cooperation encounters inherent frictions, in particular in terms of transaction costs. The latter, understood as all the costs related to the search for information, negotiation, coordination, and implementation of agreements, can compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of cooperative mechanisms. To mitigate these obstacles, the BRICS have gradually set up specific institutions, often

created *ex nihilo*, which act as structuring devices aimed at reducing these costs, channeling interactions, and establishing a formal facilitating framework.

This institutional strategy, which can be analyzed from a rationalist-functionalist perspective, thus responds to a pragmatic logic: the members agree to delegate part of their sovereignty over specific functional spaces in order to maximize joint gains and minimize transactional uncertainties. Here, the emergence of ad hoc institutions does not constitute a simple administrative instrument but a *sine qua non* condition allowing the dialectical tension between divergent interests and collective cooperation. A paradigmatic example of this is the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB), whose establishment reflects the desire to establish a credible financing mechanism oriented towards infrastructure projects, where traditional multilateral banks could prove slow or politically biased. The NDB, by offering an explicit institutional framework, reduces the uncertainties related to the identification of reliable partners, the assessment of risks, and the management of shared financial commitments (Wang and Mishra 2025; Larionova and Shelepo 2019).

The central challenge for the sustainability of cooperation within the BRICS lies in the management of the power asymmetries that characterize this heterogeneous group, as well as in the effective sharing of the benefits resulting from cooperation. These disparities, both economic and political, initiate a delicate process where the balance between influence and distribution of resources conditions the sustainability of the partnership. It is therefore crucial to understand how the members, unequal in terms of global weight and capabilities, manage to develop a *modus vivendi* where the coexistence of differentiated interests does not translate into asymmetric domination but into a pragmatic compromise that preserves collective integrity.

The asymmetry between the members is manifested in particular by the marked economic and geopolitical predominance of China, which contrasts with the more modest levels of development of Brazil, South Africa, India, and Russia. This inequality, far from being ignored, is, however, managed by means of a functional logic that favors balancing mechanisms based on economic complementarity and mutual benefits. In doing so, China does not seek so much to impose its hegemony as to structure a system of cooperation in which its power constitutes an incentive, even a lever, to pull the whole towards an upward dynamic. This scheme reflects a form of functionalist rationality where the implicit recognition of power asymmetries does not lead to fragmentation but to a cooperative organization built around shared gains and calibrated according to the respective contributions and expectations.

The New Development Bank illustrates this subtle game of balance as an institution where contributions are proportional to capacities, but the financing is intended for various projects that benefit the members in diversified proportions, taking into account national priorities and development needs. Collective governance is based on a principle of consensus and consultation, which reduces the risk of the imposition of a dominant power, thus favoring a form of collective management that values formal equality despite material inequalities (Nach and Ncwadi 2024). This institutional architecture is part of a functionalist dynamic where pragmatic cooperation alleviates structural tensions and makes it possible to go beyond the traditional logic of power by promoting concrete and shared results.

The sustainability of cooperation within the BRICS cannot be reduced to a simple recognition of power asymmetries or to the pragmatic distribution of benefits. It is also based on the implementation of a variety of mechanisms, formal and informal, intended to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts inherent in any heterogeneous organization. These mechanisms form an essential framework for articulating the complementarity of divergent interests while avoiding an escalation of tensions that would call into question the integrity of the group.

At the formal level, the BRICS institutional architecture, and in particular the New Development Bank (NDB), constitutes a central mechanism for regulating disputes related to joint projects and shared governance (Sá and Garcia 2025). It operates according to a principle of consensus, which, far from being a simple pragmatism, aims to institute a collective decision-making process where no dominant power can unilaterally impose its agenda. This provision limits the risks of frontal conflicts by incorporating a form of procedural equality, even if the influences remain unequal in practice. These formal tools reflect a functionalist logic where conflict resolution is considered a *sine qua non* condition for the sustainability of cooperation.

However, the effectiveness of these formal mechanisms is often limited by the disparity of national interests and the ideological heterogeneity of the members, which redirects a large part of conflict management to more flexible and informal spaces. Bilateral consultations and regular meetings in various formats (summit, ministerial dialogues, parallel diplomatic exchanges) play a crucial role in this non-institutionalized dimension. The controlled ambiguity and the non-formal constraints specific to relations within the BRICS fuel a climate conducive to the delayed expression of disputes, which can thus be handled outside official procedures, often perceived as cumbersome or rigid. The use of informal mechanisms reflects a diplomatic tradition of balance and subtle negotiation, similar to practices observed in other heterogeneous international groupings and which is based on interpersonal links between political and administrative elites, as well as on a culture of pragmatic dispute management inspired in part by the non-aligned approaches of previous decades (Alden and Schoeman 2025).

This capacity for progressive adaptation is also made possible thanks to the accumulation of a shared experience of conflict management, formalized and informal, which makes it possible both to stabilize internal relations and to feed a common argument in the international arena. The consensual nature of decisions, already mentioned earlier, becomes a dynamic process, not fixed, in which the rules are amended and adapted according to the circumstances. This decision-making flexibility does not call into question the existence of a framework but, on the contrary, guarantees its resilience by avoiding bureaucratic rigidity. Therefore, the institutional structure of the BRICS does not present itself as a fixed straitjacket but as an evolutionary device that combines continuity and innovation in the conduct of the partnership (Siwisa 2020).

Conclusion and discussion

In short, the rational-functionalist approach illuminates with relevance the complexity and sustainability of cooperation within the BRICS, emphasizing the pragmatic logic

that underlies the emergence and consolidation of this grouping as heterogeneous as strategic. Contrary to analyses that could be limited to a strictly normative or ideological reading of internal dynamics, this approach favors an understanding based on the rationality of the collective actors, guided above all by the search for common functional interests and the optimization of mutual benefits, despite the sometimes profound differences between the members.

One of the fundamental contributions of this perspective lies in the conception of cooperation as an evolutionary process backed by a logic of function, where each stage of institutionalization reflects a pragmatic balance between constraints and opportunities. The initial framework of the BRICS, conceived as a simple economic coordination forum, has thus continued to expand and become more complex, not by unilateral ideological voluntarism, but under the combined pressure of the functional requirements imposed by the diversity of interests and by international competition. The adaptability described in the previous subpart is then a concrete illustration of this functional rationality, where the progressive insertion of new thematic fields and the diversification of the methods of engagement reflect a collective strategy designed to maximize the relevance and resilience of the group in the face of internal asymmetries.

This rationality is also expressed in the management of latent conflicts generated by the heterogeneity of the members. Rather than ignoring or repressing tensions, BRICS diplomacy integrates them into a framework where the search for compromises is carried out around specific functions, adapted to each segment or particular issue. This functional segmentation, which can be observed in particular in the areas dedicated to development finance, energy transition, or even strategic raw materials' governance, mitigates centrifugal forces by offering differentiated and negotiated margins for maneuver. Through this organization, cooperation is nourished by a pragmatic rationality that favors operational efficiency over forced homogenization, validating the centralizing idea of functionalism, according to which convergent functional needs are a more powerful engine than divergent political or cultural identities.

Another key explanatory element lies in the cumulative dynamics of interactions. The rational-functionalist approach highlights the decisive role of the progressive "functional gains" that result from cooperation, consolidating the attachment of the members to the institution and strengthening the positive dynamics of interdependence. This gradual construction of shared interests constitutes an essential stabilizing factor, because it encourages each of the partners to preserve the common framework in order to benefit from the industrial, commercial, and geopolitical synergies that it provides. This logic is reflected in the experience accumulated by the BRICS with mechanisms such as the Partner Innovation Center, which embodies an explicit desire to stimulate global industrial cooperation on concrete technical and economic bases, going beyond simple diplomatic or symbolic ambitions.

Functional rationality extends to the evolution of the international field in which the BRICS are inserted. Far from confining itself to a posture of opposition to the Western order, the group acts in interaction, even in cooperation, with traditional industrial powers, adapting its strategies to the changing configurations of global governance. The recognition of this ability to forge detailed alliances reinforces the thesis that cooperation is not an ideological end in itself but a rational instrument used by actors

with sophisticated strategic calculations. Therefore, the sustainability of the BRICS does not result from a homogeneity of political goals but rather from a collective ability to translate specific economic and political functions into flexible and pragmatic institutional arrangements.

Thus, the rational-functionalist approach makes it possible to understand the emergence and sustainability of the BRICS not as a paradox or an anomaly in international relations, but as the logical product of a complex system where the diversity of interests is regulated by evolutionary, functional, and strategically coordinated mechanisms. This reading decenters the debate from political antagonisms alone towards the recognition of a cooperation based on a dynamic addition of shared functions and benefits, the plasticity of which ensures the viability in a context of marked asymmetries and persistent external pressures. It thus invites us to rethink the very notion of a multipolar international order by considering it as a network of cooperating entities whose survival depends on their ability to articulate plural interests in adaptable functional frameworks, rather than on a rigid identity basis.

The analysis of emerging cooperation within the BRICS, while revealing the rationalist-functionalist dynamics specific to this heterogeneous group, naturally invites us to question the transferability of this approach to other sets of emerging powers. This comparative reflection is part of a relevant extension of the limits and avenues mentioned above, since it not only makes it possible to put the results obtained into perspective but also to identify the structural and contextual conditions that favor or hinder the sustainability of multipolar cooperations in a world undergoing reconstruction.

On the other hand, emerging intergroup relations can offer a complementary laboratory to test the robustness of the rational-functionalist approach, in particular through hybrid cooperation formats such as BRICS+ or other strategic partnership initiatives upstream of formal institutionalization. These configurations capture a form of “network cooperation” where the flexibility of the actors and the multiplicity of platforms favor adaptive arrangements, following a logic of optimization of one-off advantages rather than rigid institutionalization. This dynamic is likely to reflect a contemporary trend towards asymmetric multipolarity, where cooperation is built not necessarily by seeking to establish a strong common identity or shared normative norms, but by concordant pragmatic calculations. The interest of a perspective such as this is to broaden the understanding of emerging cooperation beyond the classical frameworks by integrating the processes of decentralized, disseminated, and often fragmented international governance.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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