

Brazil-Russia-China-South Africa (BRCS) Paradox: Reconciling Normative Ambitions with Strategic Interests in the United Nations

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategic tactics used by Brazil, South Africa, China, and Russia within the United Nations to promote their interests. An analysis of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Reform (2017–2019), United Nations Development System Reform (2018–2021), and International Court of Justice (ICJ) Judicial Selection (2023) uncovers four tactics of normative realpolitik: (i) procedural contestation, (ii) personnel placement, (iii) financial leverage, and (iv) coalition coordination. The argument challenges traditional international relations theories by demonstrating that states combine normative rhetoric with material and procedural strategies to promote institutional change in ways that exceed the explanatory scope of both realism and constructivism.

Keywords: normative realpolitik, multilateral instrumentalisation, institutional entrepreneurship, governance revisionism, coalition diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Rising and emerging powers utilise access to the United Nations (UN) to gain geopolitical leverage through strategic normative discourse (Rached

& Rodrigues de Sá, 2024; Abdenur, 2016; Weiss & Abdenur, 2018). Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa (BRCS) reshape normative hierarchies in multilateral institutions using methods that existing

scholarship cannot fully explain (Pant & Scholz, 2022; Stefan, 2021). This paper argues that this practice, namely normative realpolitik, combines normative claims with procedural manipulation, material incentives, personnel positioning, and coalition-building. Three cases illustrate different tactics: (i) Brazil and South Africa's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (2017–2019) demonstrates collaborative resistance; (ii) China's United Nations Development System (UNDS) reform (2018–2021) exemplifies technocratic institutional influence; and (iii) Russia's International Court of Justice (ICJ) judicial selection (2023) indicates adversarial disruption. The BRCS grouping (excluding India from this analysis) functions as a tactical subset within the broader BRICS+ framework, which expanded in 2024 with Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, followed by Indonesia in January 2025. Across these cases, BRCS members treat universal principles as tools for narrow gains: norms are used as instruments of foreign policy.

THREE ARENAS OF NORMATIVE REALPOLITIK

Brazil and South Africa: Responsibility to Protect Reform (2017-2019)

Between 2017 and 2019, Brazil and South Africa worked together to challenge the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine (Cüre, 2025; Da Costa, 2022). Both governments considered Western interventions in Libya (2011) and Côte d'Ivoire (2011) as illegal breaches of state sovereignty (Clark, 2019). The Libya case influenced later debates, as Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised civilian protection in Benghazi, expanded into a NATO-led campaign that resulted in regime change. This outcome heightened concerns that R2P could be applied selectively and used to justify external intervention.

Brazil proposed 'Responsibility while Protecting' (RwP), aiming for stricter procedural controls to prevent the selective enforcement of R2P (Tourinho, Stuenkel, & Brockmeier, 2016). This initiative sought to position Brazil as (i) a responsible humanitarian actor, (ii) a supporter of sovereignty principles central to Latin American regionalism, and (iii) a bridge between North and South blocs (Kenkel & Cunliffe, 2016). South Africa advocated for AU leadership in addressing continental crises (Smith,

2016), emphasising that R2P should concentrate on enhancing regional organisations' capacities. This approach reflected pan-African solidarity and aspirations for regional influence (Brosig & Zähringer, 2015).

Brazil and South Africa jointly sponsored amendments at the General Assembly that included language protecting sovereignty in resolutions (UNGA, 2017). They also coordinated interventions at the Human Rights Council, which delayed the development of implementation guidelines and elevated regional bodies as primary responders to civilian protection crises (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). Through G77 forums, they fostered flexible partnerships with Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico (Sawada, 2018; Kenkel & Stefan, 2016). Resolutions passed between 2017 and 2019 feature stronger sovereignty protections than those from 2014 to 2016 (Taleski, 2018; UNGA, 2017). This coalition structure complicated Western efforts to frame interventions in Syria and Venezuela as purely humanitarian (Modeme, 2018). Syria experienced Russian and Chinese vetoes blocking R2P-based Security Council resolutions thirteen times from 2011 to 2019. Venezuela's humanitarian crisis, documented by the UN Fact-Finding Mission in 2020 as crimes against humanity, did not prompt collective R2P action despite Western pressure. Both countries expanded their outreach beyond traditional South-South partnerships, engaging with states such as Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The collaborative approach led to three outcomes. First, procedural precedents curtailed Western humanitarian interventions by imposing stricter authorisation criteria (UNGA, 2017). Second, sovereignty-focused positions gained credibility, shifting the debate from 'intervention versus non-intervention' to 'responsible intervention with safeguards' (Stefan, 2017). Third, both nations bolstered their individual strategic positions: Brazil as a moderate humanitarian voice supporting its UNSC seat bid, and South Africa as the AU's leader resisting external interference (Smith, 2016).

China: United Nations Development System Reform (2018-2021)

China's involvement in UNDS reform (2018 and 2021) reshaped global development governance (Lam & Fung, 2024). Beijing leveraged UN reform

momentum to establish its own development philosophy, promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and challenge Western development orthodoxy (Haug, 2024). Chinese representatives positioned themselves as reform advocates within the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), championing development systems based on state-led approaches (Worden, 2019). Beijing's emphasis on national ownership principles and South-South cooperation (SSC) reflected efforts to introduce alternative development logics (Haug, 2021). This dual stance allowed China to present itself both as a champion of developing countries and as a revisionist power (Boon, 2018).

China's UNDS contributions (2013-2017) grew by 33.8% annually, reaching USD \$325.869 million by 2017 (Mao, 2020:4). This included USD \$120.157 million in assessed contributions, USD \$38.778 million in voluntary core funding, and USD \$166.934 million in voluntary non-core funding (Mao, 2020:6), contrasting with Western donors relying on earmarked contributions (Zhang & Jing, 2024:123-125). This three-part funding structure created layered influence: assessed contributions provided structural support, core voluntary funding ensured institutional backing, and earmarked funding enabled targeted influence over programmes (Zhang & Jing, 2024). China's financial strategy matched its work through the New Development Bank (NDB), which by 2024 had approved over \$39 billion across more than 100 projects - matching established multilateral development banks despite operating for less than a decade. The NDB's 2024 bond issuances of \$16.1 billion, secured at spreads of only 0.24% above benchmark rates for renminbi bonds, demonstrated market confidence in Chinese-led financial architecture.

Chinese experts have revised the UN's operational procedures and programming standards within UN development agencies (Baumann *et al.*, 2024). China has advanced alternative metrics that focus on infrastructure connectivity, the capacity for state investment and SSC, replacing traditional governance indicators and private-sector development benchmarks (Liu & Li, 2025). These technical updates appeared as neutral institutional changes but favoured development models aligned with Chinese economic practices and BRI priorities (Gülseven, 2023). China promoted 'complementary metrics' that aim to measure

infrastructure readiness and reflect diverse development paths. This framing made opposition difficult as it favoured state-led, infrastructure-heavy approaches.

Russia: International Court of Justice (2023)

Russia's intervention in the 2023 ICJ judiciary elections challenged Western legal dominance within UN frameworks (Aram, 2024). Russia exploited ICJ electoral procedures and applied diplomatic pressure to undermine Western confidence in international legal institutions (Stahn, 2023). This analysis examines Russian behaviour within UN institutional settings without assessing the legality or morality of Russian actions in Ukraine. The focus is on how states use multilateral forums to advance strategic objectives.

During the 2023 ICJ judicial elections conducted by both the UNGA and UNSC, Russia cast its vote, but the incumbent Russian judge, Kirill Gevorgian, did not secure re-election. Judges from Australia, Romania, the United States, Mexico, and South Africa were appointed instead (UN, 2023a; ICJ, 2023; UN, 2023b; UNOG, 2023). This outcome concealed Russia's achievement of other strategic objectives through procedural disruption. Records show Russian engagement with non-aligned delegations during procedural sessions, consolidating support for candidates sympathetic to state sovereignty perspectives (UNOG, 2023). Russia participated in Sixth Committee procedural debates concerning nomination timelines and regional representation, exploiting institutional rules to maintain a strategic presence (ICJ, 2023; UN, 2023a).

Russian diplomatic efforts centred on three interconnected strategies. First, Russia challenged the credentials and selection processes of Western-nominated judges, asserting that these contravened principles of fair regional representation. Russian officials formally raised objections during procedural sessions, causing delays and highlighting perceived inequalities, thereby impacting debates on institutional fairness (Labuda, 2023; Frulli, 2023). Second, Russia collaborated with other states from the Global South to propose reforms to the ICJ electoral system, emphasising greater representation for the Global South to counter Western dominance. Third, Russia endorsed regional institutions and bilateral dispute resolution mechanisms over the ICJ's

authority, encouraging peer states to adopt similar strategies to limit the ICJ's capacity to constrain Russian foreign policy through unfavourable rulings (Allison, 2022). Russia also backed candidates from the Global South who expressed scepticism towards Western interpretations of international law, underlining the importance of state sovereignty.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: NORMATIVE REALPOLITIK

Traditional international relations theories fail to explain BRCS behaviour across humanitarian, development, and judicial spheres. Realist perspectives dismiss normative discourse as mere window-dressing (Brütsch & Papa, 2013; Yang, 2019). Constructivist frameworks presume genuine normative commitment (Lagutina, 2019; Weins, 2016). Neither approach accounts for instances where Brazil-South Africa R2P advocacy, Chinese UNDS promotion, and Russian legal discourse shift to serve evolving geopolitical aims (Wunderlich, 2020; 2022).

Realism explains elements of BRCS behaviour. Brütsch and Papa (2013) argue that BRCS members use UN institutions instrumentally to constrain Western hegemonic power and advance individual state interests through coalition-building. This perspective views BRCS advocacy for institutional reform as a challenge by a rising power to established hierarchies (Yang, 2019). Realism accounts for Brazil and South Africa's R2P reform resistance, China's repositioning of SSC frameworks, and Russia's ICJ intervention as attempts at power balancing against Western legal dominance (Peitz, 2015). However, realism cannot explain ongoing cross-case coordination: Brazil and South Africa coordinate R2P resistance while China influences development institutions and Russia promotes judicial influence, even as BRCS members compete over territorial claims and spheres of influence (Skak, 2011). The theory offers no tools to understand this cooperation amid persistent mutual suspicion (Pruitt, 2022).

Liberal institutionalism does not account for Brazil and South Africa's R2P engagement, China's involvement in UNDS reform, or Russia's manipulation in ICJ selection (Vadell, 2020). While liberal frameworks assume that institutional

participation fosters genuine commitment to institutional goals, they overlook cases where states exploit institutional rules for purposes that oppose the institutions' missions (Guerrero, 2022). Constructivist scholarship ignores cases where Brazil-South Africa R2P advocacy, China's promotion of its development system, and Russian legal discourse contestation serve instrumental objectives (Wunderlich, 2020). Constructivist perspectives are limited when norm-based language is repurposed to support shifting geopolitical goals, raising questions about normative alignment (Wunderlich, 2022). Relying on norm internalisation ignores the instrumental manoeuvring used by states to influence institutional outcomes in humanitarian, development, and judicial spheres (Bloomfield & Scott, 2017).

Critical international relations theory views BRCS institutional engagement as opposition to Western hegemonic governance structures (Valdir & Elena, 2022). Critical theorists highlight the emancipatory potential of BRCS institutional challenges, arguing that Brazil-South Africa R2P resistance, China UNDS reform intervention, and Russia ICJ intervention represent alternatives to Western-dominated global governance (Yang, 2019). However, critical analysis often overstates the transformative power

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of BRCS institutional engagement, neglecting cases where Brazil, South Africa, China, and Russia seek individual benefit within collective resistance patterns (Van Noort, 2019; Boland, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explores three cases exemplifying different engagement strategies: Brazil-South Africa's R2P reform (collaborative resistance), China's UNDS participation (technocratic positioning), and Russia's ICJ intervention (adversarial engagement). India's exclusion reflects its limited involvement in these institutional settings during this period. India exerted influence through peacekeeping leadership by contributing over 250,000 personnel to UN operations since 1948, making it the largest cumulative contributor. Additionally, India participated in climate diplomacy, notably via the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. India's 2023 G20 presidency reflected its preference for agenda-setting through inclusive multilateralism over institutional contestation.

Data Collection

Data sources include academic research, UN documentation (GA/SC resolutions, ECOSOC records, and financial data), legal materials, and policy analysis. The data collection for each case consisted of:

- Brazil-South Africa (R2P, 2017-2019): UNGA/GA resolutions and meeting records (A/RES/71/248), Security Council debates on Syria and Venezuela, joint G77 statements, government position papers, and secondary analyses cited in text.
- China (UNDS, 2018-2021): ECOSOC records, UNDS reform resolutions, UNDP programme documents, assessed/voluntary contribution records, and technical guidance documents.
- Russia (ICJ, 2023): UN Journal entries for judicial elections, Sixth Committee records, ICJ nomination filings, legal commentaries, and contemporaneous diplomatic reporting.

This combination of primary UN documents and secondary scholarship facilitated triangulation. UN documents offered official positions and voting records; scholarly analyses provided interpretive context and insights into informal diplomatic processes not captured in official records.

Data Analysis

Analysis was carried out using inductive thematic coding founded on grounded theory principles.

- Open coding: Documents were analysed to identify diplomatic actions, normative claims, and institutional changes, resulting in 25 initial codes that describe behaviours (e.g., 'procedural objection filed,' 'funding increase announced,' and 'coalition meeting convened').
- Axial coding: Preliminary codes were organised into categories that linked behaviours to strategic objectives, reducing 25 codes to 17 categories (e.g., 'sovereignty protection tactics,' 'financial leverage deployment,' and 'coalition coordination').
- Selective coding: Categories were grouped into four main themes illustrating patterns of normative instrumentalisation: sovereignty maximisation, institutional positioning, coalition coherence, and strategic instrumentalisation.

The coding process moved between data and emerging themes. Early codes shaped subsequent data collection; new data prompted recoding of earlier material. This iterative approach allowed patterns to emerge from the data.

Scope and Limitations

Language barriers restrict this study. Reliance on English-language secondary sources and official translations may obscure nuanced policy positions. Future research, including primary sources in Chinese, Russian, Portuguese, and Arabic, would strengthen the evidence, particularly in understanding domestic policy debates shaping BRCS positions. This study omits BRCS coordination through regional organisations, bilateral channels, and informal networks by focusing on UN institutions. Such an approach enables detailed institutional analysis but cannot capture all multilateral engagement methods. BRCS members likely coordinate via meetings, bilateral summits, and informal diplomatic channels not recorded in UN archives. The October 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, which established a new 'partner country' category for 13 nations and promoted BRICS+, exemplifies these efforts. Cross-border settlement infrastructure reveals coordination structures operating outside the UN's scope but affecting member state positions within multilateral forums.

FINDINGS: THREE MODALITIES OF NORMATIVE REALPOLITIK

The findings present three different approaches to institutional engagement, each tailored to different power positions and threat environments. The findings that follow show how BRCS members have developed repertoires for transforming normative discourse into institutional leverage.

Sovereignty-focused contestation in humanitarian governance (Brazil and South Africa)

The Brazil-South Africa partnership demonstrates sustained procedural resistance. Both countries

recognised that outright rejection of R2P would marginalise them within humanitarian governance debates. The approach succeeded because it appeared to strengthen R2P but limited its interventionist potential. Brazil's 'Responsibility while Protecting' did not condemn humanitarian intervention. It endorsed the principle and added so many procedural safeguards that implementation became almost impossible. This exemplifies collaborative normative realpolitik at its finest: building Global South coalitions to incorporate sovereignty protections into humanitarian governance frameworks and maintaining the facade of constructive engagement.

Table 2: **Tactical Deployment Across Modalities of Normative Realpolitik**

Tactic	Collaborative (Brazil–South Africa)	Technocratic (China)	Adversarial (Russia)
Procedural contestation	Joint GA amendments and multilateral negotiation delays	ECOSOC procedural revisions	Sixth Committee objections and nomination-blocking tactics
Personnel placement	Strategic delegation positioning	High-level UNDP and agency appointments	Alignment with sovereignist judiciary networks
Financial leverage	Regional capacity building contributions	Restructured core + voluntary contributions and South-South trust funds	Targeted bilateral incentive diplomacy
Coalition coordination	G77 + China Non-Aligned Movement; and AU	SSC forums and Global South negotiation groups	Non-aligned sovereign cluster (Iran, Venezuela, and Syria)

The procedural architecture they created operated across multiple institutional venues simultaneously. First, they co-sponsored General Assembly amendments that incorporated language reinforcing sovereignty in R2P resolutions. Textual analysis shows that resolutions adopted between 2017 and 2019 include more extensive sovereignty provisions than those from 2014 to 2016, with language noticeable to advocacy by Brazil and South Africa (UNGA, 2017). Second, they coordinated interventions within the Human Rights Council that delayed the implementation of the guidelines for R2P and introduced additional sovereignty safeguards. The effectiveness of these interventions relied less on their number and more on their timing – they raised strategic objections at critical moments during drafting when substantive

changes were still negotiable. These interventions highlighted regional organisations as key actors in civilian protection, shifting authority from the Security Council to regional bodies (GCRP, 2025).

Third, they engaged with G77 forums to shape R2P implementation guidelines, carefully forming coalitions that extended beyond traditional South-South partnerships. Their alliances with Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico showed an understanding that legitimacy in humanitarian governance depends on broad partnerships, not solely South-South solidarity. Fourth, they sustained contributions to UNSC debates by referencing regional bodies as primary responders in humanitarian crises. This was not rhetorical, as each intervention established precedents that limited Western member states'

ability to advocate for expansive humanitarian intervention interpretations during discussions on Syria (2017-2018) and Venezuela (2019).

The institutional outcomes highlight the results of this patient, multi-venue strategy. First, concrete procedural precedents now limit Western humanitarian intervention in ways that would have been unimaginable before 2017. R2P resolutions adopted between 2017 and 2019 include stricter approval criteria and strengthen the authority of regional organisations (UNGA, 2017). Second, Brazil and South Africa succeeded in presenting sovereignty-maximising positions as legitimate reform proposals rather than as obstructionism. By framing opposition as constructive reform, they shifted the debate from ‘intervention versus non-intervention’ to ‘responsible intervention with appropriate safeguards’ (Stefan, 2017). This discursive shift was more influential than any single resolution. It transformed the entire framework of humanitarian governance discussions. Third, both nations strategically reinforced their individual positions within distinct diplomatic constituencies. Brazil solidified its reputation as a moderate voice on humanitarian issues to support its campaign for permanent UNSC membership. Meanwhile, South Africa strengthened its AU leadership credentials through resistance to external intervention. Thus, collaborative *realpolitik* produced both collective institutional change and individual strategic advantages - a combination that explains its sustainability over time.

Developmental Recalibration Through Institutional Engineering (China)

Brazil and South Africa engaged in procedural contestation. China pursued the reconstruction of development governance from within. China demonstrates technocratic *realpolitik* by embedding alternative development standards through incremental institutional engineering that appears as neutral technical reform. China’s UNDS engagement operated mainly below the threshold of political controversy, reshaping institutional DNA through financial leverage and technical expertise.

Consider the financial structure. China’s tripartite funding system creates multiple levels of influence: assessed contributions offer structural support, core voluntary funding provides institutional backing, and earmarked funding allows for

targeted influence. Western donors mainly use earmarked funding, which gives them control over specific projects but not over institutional priorities. China understood what Western donors did not: that institutional power stems not from controlling individual projects but from shaping the systems that decide which projects receive funding, how they are evaluated, and what is deemed successful. China’s financial approach reflects its work with the New Development Bank (NDB), which by 2024 had approved over \$39 billion across more than 100 projects—comparable to established multilateral development banks despite being in operation for less than ten years. The NDB’s 2024 bond issuances of \$16.1 billion, secured at spreads of only 0.24% above benchmark rates for renminbi bonds, showed market confidence in Chinese-led financial architecture.

Personnel deployment formed the second pillar of China’s strategy, operating through three reinforcing channels. Firstly, China secured direct appointments of Chinese nationals to senior positions within UNDP and related agencies, gaining not only symbolic representation but also insider knowledge of decision-making processes and informal power dynamics (Fung & Lam, 2021). Secondly, China sponsored SSC forums and technical exchanges that showcased Chinese development experiences as solutions to development challenges (Chen *et al.*, 2018). These efforts fostered epistemic communities of development practitioners from the Global South trained in Chinese approaches, who spoke the language of infrastructure-led development and carried these frameworks back to their national governments and regional institutions. Thirdly, China implemented capacity-building initiatives that conveyed Beijing’s governance models to actors in the Global South. The cumulative effect was noteworthy: Chinese-sponsored training programmes, technical exchanges, and educational partnerships established networks of officials who viewed Chinese development models not as foreign impositions but as proven solutions they had experienced first-hand.

The third pillar, which is the technical revision of UN operational procedures, proved the most consequential because it appeared the least political. Chinese technical experts engaged UN development agencies to revise operational

procedures and programming criteria. This approach proved effective because of how China framed its interventions: not as challenges to existing development orthodoxy but as 'complementary metrics' that would 'better capture infrastructure readiness' and 'reflect diverse development trajectories.' China promoted alternative development metrics emphasising infrastructure connectivity, state investment capacity, and SSC, steadily displacing traditional governance indicators and private-sector development measures (Liu & Li, 2025). These technical revisions appeared as neutral institutional improvements – who could object to more comprehensive measurement? – but favoured development approaches consistent with Chinese economic models and BRI priorities. Opposition proved difficult because China never explicitly attacked Western development models. China advocated for additional metrics that happened to privilege state-led and infrastructure-intensive approaches.

This technical-political duality extended to China's alignment of UN development programmes with BRI. China supported UN inter-agency initiatives integrating connectivity and infrastructure development (UN, 2018), working through ECOSOC coordination with developing-country blocs to promote frameworks linking development financing, infrastructure connectivity, and SSC under institutional umbrellas favourable to Chinese interests. Chinese officials framed UNDS reform as an institutional rebalancing towards multipolar development governance. This characterisation positioned China as both a defender of developing countries and as a revisionist power. China pursued normative repositioning through dual tracks: technocratic involvement in UN development reform combined with political alignment with Global South coalitions advocating institutional restructuring. The focus on repositioning SSC as the primary development modality, favouring state-to-state development over multilateral frameworks and capital-intensive projects over governance reform, reshaped the normative contours of global development cooperation.

The institutional outcomes generated by China's technocratic approach differ from those produced by collaborative or adversarial realpolitik. First, China succeeded in legitimising its economic model

as an internationally recognised development approach (Mao, 2020). By embedding Chinese development philosophy within UN frameworks, China transformed the 'Beijing Consensus' from a controversial alternative into an officially sanctioned UN development practice. This represents a profound form of institutional power – the power to determine not just which projects get funded but what counts as development itself.

Second, Chinese developmental framing became mainstreamed in multilateral negotiations, reflecting emerging competition within global norm-setting processes. The incorporation of China-led modalities into UN resolutions introduced new metrics for evaluating partnership outcomes – metrics that emphasise state infrastructure readiness over governance quality, economic corridors over private sector development, and bilateral partnerships over multilateral frameworks. These shifts reinforced the normative authority of Chinese state-led aid practices while gradually marginalising Western emphasis on democratic governance, civil society participation, and market-led growth.

Third, China introduced institutional changes across multiple UN agencies and programmes that will endure beyond any specific political moment. China's engagement with the UNDS reflected an understanding that technical-level reforms and financial influence lead to more lasting change than high-profile political declarations. Development approaches revised through UNDS reform procedures generated institutional momentum favouring Chinese development models that will persist long after individual reform debates end. This durability does not stem from these models winning intellectual debates but from becoming embedded in bureaucratic routines, training programmes, and evaluation frameworks. Technical changes last longer than political victories because they shape the taken-for-granted assumptions about how development work is carried out.

Fourth, China strengthened its position within UN governance structures while changing what that governance produces. By presenting itself as a reform leader and a major financial contributor, China claimed greater institutional authority and positioned itself as a responsible stakeholder in

global development cooperation (Fung & Lam, 2022), supporting its wider diplomatic aim of reshaping international institutions to mirror multipolar power distributions. However, the real achievement lies not in China's increased institutional status but in how China exploited that status to reconfigure development governance itself. This transformed the UN system from a tool used to promote Washington Consensus reforms into a platform for legitimising state-led development alternatives.

Procedural Disruption Within Judicial Governance (Russia)

Russia's approach to the ICJ exemplifies a third modality – adversarial *realpolitik* that prioritises disruption, delay, and delegitimisation over institutional capture or incremental reform. Russia faced legal challenges from Ukraine at the ICJ. Russian officials targeted not specific rulings but the procedural legitimacy of the entire international judicial system. The 2023 ICJ judicial elections served as a suitable platform: highly procedural, reliant on complex voting arrangements between the General Assembly and Security Council, and sufficiently technical that minority coalitions could exploit procedural chokepoints to exert disproportionate influence.

Russian diplomatic engagement focused on three interconnected tactics. First, Russia challenged the credentials and selection processes of Western-nominated judges, presenting these challenges not as obstructionism but as principled objections to violations of fair geographical representation. Russian representatives formally lodged objections during procedural sessions, causing delays while highlighting perceived imbalances in judicial representation (Labuda, 2023). The tactic was effective in achieving its objectives because it weaponised claims of procedural fairness. These arguments resonated with non-aligned states, which had their own grievances about Western dominance in international institutions.

Second, Russia collaborated with states from the Global South to propose reforms to the ICJ electoral procedures, stressing greater representation for the Global South and rotation schemes aimed at countering Western dominance. Third, Russia promoted regional institutions and bilateral dispute resolution arrangements over

ICJ authority, encouraging peer states to adopt similar strategies with the clear aim of limiting the ICJ's ability to restrict Russian foreign policy through unfavourable rulings (Allison, 2022). Throughout, Russia supported candidates from the Global South who were sceptical of Western interpretations of international law, presenting this not as anti-law but as backing legal pluralism and state sovereignty.

Russia's coalition structure highlights a key difference between adversarial and collaborative *realpolitik*. Official UN General Assembly voting records show engagement with countries such as Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Venezuela. These states are united not by shared development goals or regional solidarity but by a common threat perception and mutual grievances against Western legal frameworks. This coalition structure contrasts with Brazil-South Africa's adaptable partnerships or China's development-focused networks. Russia's alliances concentrate on states undergoing similar Western legal pressures, forming a defensive coalition of those legally challenged.

Russia compensated for limited economic leverage or technical expertise through procedural manipulation. The Russian approach demonstrated an understanding of UN procedural complexities, showing how minority coalitions can disrupt majority preferences by strategically employing parliamentary tactics (Mik, 2022). Russian UN mission statements confirmed the existence of procedural education programmes that train sympathetic delegations in delaying tactics. These programmes instruct allies on exactly when to raise points of order, how to request recesses for consultation, and which procedural objections would maximise delay while still appearing formally appropriate. This constitutes institutional engagement as tactical resistance: leveraging detailed knowledge of procedural terrain to offset material disadvantages.

The adversarial modality produced three outcomes that reveal both the possibilities and limits of disruptive *realpolitik*. First, Russia caused procedural delays and increased uncertainty in judicial selection processes – the 2023 ICJ judicial selection experienced multiple postponements and procedural challenges linked to Russian interventions. Gevorgian lost

re-election, which indicates a tactical failure. However, focusing solely on individual outcomes overlooks the strategic achievement of Russian geopolitical interests. The process itself became a contested arena, undermining confidence in ICJ institutional integrity and setting precedents for procedural resistance.

Second, Russia facilitated the discursive reframing of judicial selection as being geopolitically influenced instead of legally neutral. Russian officials described the outcome as necessitating 'judicial rebalancing' towards 'multipolar legal interpretation' (Miles, 2024; Allison, 2022). This reframing matters because it shifts the focus from whether Russia breached international law to

whether international law itself reflects Western preferences in a universal guise. Even allies who oppose Russian positions on Ukraine may share concerns about Western legal dominance. Russia exploited this division.

Third, Russia set precedents for procedural resistance tactics that other states can deploy. Russia's tactical combination of formal objections, coalition coordination, and alternative institution-building provided a replicable playbook for revisionist powers seeking to constrain ICJ authority without formally withdrawing from it. This represents a distinct form of institutional power – not the power to shape institutional outputs but the power to render institutions less effective as constraints on state behaviour.

Strategic Behaviour and Institutional Power

Table 3: Generalisable Strategic Patterns

Dimension	Collaborative	Technocratic	Adversarial
Strategic Logic	Sovereign Maximising coalition	Institutional engineering	Contestation and procedural disruption
Institutional arena	Humanitarian governance	Development governance	Judiciary governance
Mechanism	Procedural resonance	Technical embedding through metrics, staffing and funding	Negative agenda setting and barriers
Expression of power	Middle power brokerage	Structural influence via budgets and expertise	Revisionist pressure targeting procedural vulnerabilities
Resulting institutional effect	Consensus-driven sovereignty language	Recalibration of development indicators	Uncertainty, delay, and contested judicial processes

There are patterns beneath the surface differences across these three cases. The three modalities share characteristics: instrumental use of normative claims, leveraging institutional procedures, coalition-building, and ongoing engagement over time. However, they differ in ways that show the connection between power resources, strategic settings, and institutional tactics.

The divergence occurs across three key dimensions. First, the relationship to institutional authority reflects different theories of institutional change. The collaborative approach operates

within institutional frameworks to achieve gradual change through consensus-building. It accepts institutional legitimacy and reconfigures its substantive content. The technocratic mode reshapes institutional frameworks through technical establishment that appears as a neutral improvement. It preserves institutional structures and transforms their substance. The adversarial approach challenges institutional authority through delegitimisation and disruption. It prioritises constraint over capture when the institution poses direct threats.

These differences reflect distinct strategic contexts. Brazil-South Africa sought institutional influence without triggering backlash, requiring approaches that appeared as constructive engagement. China possessed resources to reshape institutions through financial and technical influence, enabling institutional penetration. Russia faced institutional hostility, requiring defensive disruption to prevent institutions from constraining Russian foreign policy. The approach selected depends less on ideological commitment than on the opportunity structure presented by specific power positions and threat environments.

Second, coalition architecture reflects varying power resources and strategic objectives. Collaborative mode builds flexible, issue-specific partnerships activated for particular normative battles without permanent commitments – enabling states with limited material resources to punch above their weight through skilled diplomatic brokerage. The technocratic mode creates development-focused networks with economic incentives that bind partners through material dependencies. This transforms financial contributions into institutional loyalty. Adversarial mode assembles sovereign clusters united by shared threat perception and mutual grievance against Western institutional dominance. This mobilises defensive solidarities when positive inducements prove unavailable.

These differences highlight different approaches to forming alliances. Brazil and South Africa used diplomatic skills and strategic connections to form adaptable coalitions suitable for various institutional settings. China relied on economic incentives and technical knowledge to establish long-lasting networks that extended multiple issue areas. Russia, on the other hand, invoked shared grievances and perceived threats to form defensive alliances. These alliances are less integrated than China's economically driven networks, but suffice for disruption in building partnerships.

Third, temporal orientation clarifies how different modalities conceptualise institutional change. The collaborative approach emphasises gradual change through persistent accumulation of small victories that build over time. This assumes that sovereignty protections in humanitarian resolutions limit intervention options in the future. The technocratic

approach focuses on the long-term integration of alternative standards into institutional routines, training programmes, and evaluation frameworks. It assumes that bureaucratic change outlasts political victories because it influences assumptions guiding daily work. The adversarial approach emphasises immediate disruption with lasting delegitimisation effects that weaken institutional authority. It aims to prevent institutions from constraining state behaviour even when they cannot reshape institutional outputs.

These orientations correspond to different strategic objectives. Brazil-South Africa sought gradual norm evolution favouring sovereignty protection. China aimed for structural transformation, promoting Chinese development models as global standards. Russia required immediate constraints on Western legal instruments threatening Russian interests. The temporal limit chosen exposes what states want from institutions: evolutionary adaptation, fundamental transformation, or strategic neutralisation.

Understanding when and where normative realpolitik emerges requires defining the institutional conditions that support it. Normative realpolitik arises under three main conditions. First, when institutions have complex procedural rules that allow contestation without confrontation. Simple majority-vote institutions offer limited opportunities for minority influence. However, institutions with multiple decision-making bodies create procedural choke points that some actors can manipulate. The UN system, with its General Assembly, Security Council, ECOSOC, Human Rights Council, and Sixth Committee, provides various venues where the same issue can be debated, where procedural objections can cause delays, and where coalition-building across venues enhances influence. This institutional complexity turns procedural knowledge into a powerful resource as valuable as material capabilities.

Second, when multiple coalitions compete for influence within the same institutional space, hegemonic institutions dominated by single powers offer limited scope for normative realpolitik – the hegemon can override opposition. Multipolar institutions with fluid coalitions create opportunities for strategic alliance-building and normative repositioning. The contemporary

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UN system exemplifies this condition: Western dominance has eroded but not disappeared, rising powers are influential but not hegemonic, and middle powers possess sufficient diplomatic skill to sway contested votes. This results in competitive pluralism – no single coalition can impose its will, forcing all actors to compete for institutional influence through strategic engagement rather than material dominance.

Third, when states have sufficient material resources to maintain engagement over time, normative realpolitik necessitates multi-year campaigns, technical expertise, coalition management, and financial support. It is not a tactic available to all, as shown in this paper's cases. This explains why middle powers (Brazil and South Africa) and rising powers (China and Russia) excel at these tactics, while weaker states resort to simple blocking strategies. Brazil and South Africa deploy diplomatic capital and professional expertise; China leverages financial resources and technical capacity; Russia exploits procedural knowledge and coalition coordination. All possess the institutional know-how required for sustained engagement. This is a threshold many states cannot reach.

The concept of normative realpolitik has inherent theoretical limitations that warrant acknowledgement. First, it pertains to middle and emerging powers aiming for influence within institutions, rather than to hegemonies or weaker states. Hegemonies possess sufficient power to reshape institutions through direct pressure, rendering procedural manipulation unnecessary – why control the committee system when

compliance can be demanded? Weak states lack the resources for sustained normative efforts, confining them to occasional blocks or principled objections without the capacity to alter institutional outcomes. Normative realpolitik operates in the middle: too weak for direct enforcement, yet too strong for mere resistance, and precisely where strategic institutional engagement provides the greatest returns.

Second, it requires institutions that are open to procedural contestation and coalition formation. Institutions with rigid decision-making rules or limited membership offer fewer opportunities for normative realpolitik. There are fewer procedural avenues to exploit. The UN system's complexity, diverse membership, and multiple decision-making bodies create fertile ground for strategic engagement. Every additional committee, procedural step, and coalition possibility presents a potential venue for influence. This explains why normative realpolitik thrives at the UN but struggles in more streamlined institutions like the International Monetary Fund, where voting is weighted by financial contribution and procedural complexity is deliberately limited.

Third, it relies on sustained engagement over multiple years as opposed to just months. Sporadic blocking actions or opportunistic forum-shopping are not genuine forms of normative realpolitik; they are tactical moves which are not part of a long-term strategic plan. Normative realpolitik involves multi-year efforts combining normative claims, procedural tactics, coalition building, and resource allocation. For example, Brazil and South Africa's R2P engagement lasted from 2017 to 2019, China's UNDS reform spanned 2018 to 2021, and Russia's ICJ intervention was based on years of preparatory work. This time component sets normative realpolitik apart from simpler forms of institutional resistance, showing it as a complex, long-term strategy instead of reactive opposition.

Implications for Global Governance

The three cases demonstrate a shift in how emerging powers engage with multilateral institutions. It is a shift that existing theoretical frameworks cannot adequately explain. BRCS engagement with UN institutions signifies not opportunistic manoeuvring but the use of governance norms for national goals. This finding challenges

assumptions in traditional international relations theory. Neorealist balance-of-power expectations predict military build-ups, alliance formation, or institutional withdrawal, but miss the patient procedural contestation and technical embedding documented here. Why withdraw from institutions when it is possible to reconfigure them from within? Liberal institutionalist confidence in shared-norm cooperation overlooks how institutions serve as arenas of strategic manoeuvring where states exploit institutional rules for strategic ends while giving the appearance of cooperative engagement.

What emerges is a strategic revisionism in governance: engaging multilateral institutions to promote interests through reconstructing governance norms. This marks a shift in how emerging powers approach international institutions, emphasising instrumentalisation rather than normative commitment. Each BRCS member has built alternative alliance networks that provide multilateral legitimacy for institutional engagement, preventing Western powers from isolating revisionist behaviour through traditional diplomatic pressures. The claim of norm violation becomes less convincing when the accused can point to numerous co-sponsors, cite procedural legitimacy, and present their positions as representing Global South perspectives as opposed to narrow national interests.

BRICS+, comprising nine full members and nine partner countries, represents around 4 billion people and 41% of global GDP at purchasing power parity. This enhances BRICS members' legitimacy when advocating for sovereignty-optimising positions. The 2024 Kazan Declaration's emphasis on 'strengthening multilateralism for equitable global development and security', along with the launch of BRICS Clear, an autonomous cross-border settlement system aimed at reducing dollar reliance, exemplifies this dual strategy of normative appeal paired with tangible institution-building. This duality reveals modern governance reformism: never dismiss the system, always seek to improve it, but develop alternatives that decrease dependence on existing institutions.

The pattern outlined here demonstrates how emerging powers develop governance models that rival Western institutions through three interconnected strategies: gradual recalibration

that appears as reform rather than rejection, technical integration that subtly reshapes institutional DNA without provoking political backlash, and procedural disruption that limits institutional effectiveness without formal withdrawal. Collectively, these strategies form a cohesive approach to institutional change that operates beneath the threshold of confrontation while delivering substantial revisionist outcomes.

The implications for global governance are substantial. If normative realpolitik becomes the primary mode of institutional engagement, multilateral institutions will increasingly function as venues for strategic rivalry instead of cooperative problem-solving. Norms will be viewed as tools to be used. Commitments will not be honoured. Procedural rules will be exploited for tactical gain without regard for institutional functioning. Coalitions will be formed based on strategic interests. Shared values will not determine coalitions. This does not mean institutions become irrelevant as they still function as arenas where power is contested, and legitimacy is built. However, institutions will operate differently than liberal theory suggests, acting less as mechanisms to socialise states towards shared norms and more as spaces where states pursue interests through normative language. Recognising this shift is important for policymakers managing contemporary multilateral governance.

CONCLUSIONS

BRCS nations reshape global governance through three distinct but related strategies: collaborative resistance (Brazil-South Africa), technocratic positioning (China), and adversarial contestation (Russia). This challenge tests both realist and liberal institutionalist ideas about how states use multilateral institutions. Realists underestimate how institutions act as forums for projecting power beyond military strength. Liberals overestimate how institutions encourage states to adopt shared norms. Both overlook the strategic middle ground this study highlights.

This paper offers an operational definition of normative realpolitik: the strategic use of normative claims and institutional procedures to maintain lasting influence within multilateral organisations without provoking the backlash

that open confrontation might cause. The cases of Brazil-South Africa, China, and Russia illustrate three modalities of this approach (collaborative, technocratic, and adversarial), showing how emerging powers turn normative competition into institutional influence. These modalities differ in tactics, coalition structure, and timing, but they share core features: purposeful norm deployment, procedural manipulation, coalition building, and ongoing engagement.

The three cases show a tension: BRICS members invoke universal principles to advance narrow interests, use multilateral forums to limit multilateralism's transformative potential, and advocate for global governance while resisting normative constraints. This tension is not a flaw in the concept but an inherent part of normative realpolitik itself. The approach relies on maintaining a gap between normative rhetoric and strategic practice by selectively invoking norms, exploiting procedural rules opportunistically, forming pragmatic coalitions, and engaging strategically.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore whether the significant BRICS expansion – from five founding members in 2009 to nine full members and nine partners by 2025 – affects normative realpolitik dynamics. The inclusion of major fossil fuel producers (UAE, Iran) and geopolitically crucial states (Egypt, Ethiopia) introduces actors with differing regional interests and ties to Western powers. Does expansion weaken BRICS's tactical coherence or increase their collective influence? The October 2024 creation of the “partner country”

category, providing observer status to nations including Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, indicates BRICS+ is prioritising breadth over ideological consistency. However, Brazil's veto of Venezuela's accession – citing the disputed 2024 election – shows that even with expanded membership, internal tensions over normative boundaries remain.

Additional research priorities encompass five key areas. First, monitoring normative realpolitik tactics beyond 2023 to evaluate their sustainability and how they adapt during the 2024-2025 expansion, alongside the rise of BRICS, the Interbank Cooperation Mechanism, and local currency settlement platforms that could decrease reliance on dollar-based institutions. Second, comparing failed and successful attempts at normative repositioning. Third, examining Western counter-tactics aimed at opposing institutional reconfiguration – specifically through the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and revamped multilateral development bank lending, which compete with NDB and BRI frameworks. Fourth, analysing India's unique influence through peacekeeping and climate diplomacy, including its 2023 G20 presidency's “Voice of the Global South” initiative and its mediating role between BRICS members (notably China) and Western groups (Quad, I2U2). Fifth, assessing how smaller states like Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico navigate their positions between BRICS-led and Western-led normative systems – especially those with BRICS partner status – balancing competing institutional loyalties.

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