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Veiled Hegemony: China’s Influence in BRICS through the Belt and Road

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Abstract: This study analyzes China’s strategic use of the association of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as an institutional platform to advance the Belt and Road Initiative and strengthen its influence in global governance. The research aims to explain how China consolidates hegemonic leadership through institutional mechanisms within the grouping. Using Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, the study conceptualizes dominance as operating through material power and ideological leadership. The research employs qualitative methods based on documentary analysis of official reports, summit declarations, and relevant literature. The findings identify three interconnected mechanisms. First, China promotes narratives of multipolarity and South–South cooperation to construct ideological leadership. Second, China institutionalizes its agenda through the New Development Bank, where infrastructure financing aligns with connectivity objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative. Third, China’s dominant economic position within the grouping generates structural dependencies that influence member states’ policy autonomy. The study concludes that this institutional synergy reconfigures, rather than eliminates, hegemonic structures in global governance through consensual arrangements.

Keyword: BRICS, Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese hegemony, global governance, Gramsci theory

INTRODUCTION

A Over the past decade, BRICS has emerged as one of the most influential coalitions among developing nations, reshaping global power dynamics. Established in 2009 and expanded with South Africa’s inclusion in 2011, BRICS was founded to promote economic cooperation among emerging economies, advocate reform in global governance, and challenge Western-dominated international institutions. Representing approximately 3.2 billion people and accounting for nearly 24 percent of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms (IMF 2024), the bloc commands substantial economic weight. Yet within this coalition, China occupies a uniquely dominant position—not merely as the largest economy but as the strategic actor shaping its institutional direction.

Parallel to BRICS’ consolidation, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, a large-scale infrastructure and connectivity strategy spanning more than 140 countries

and involving investments exceeding USD 1 trillion. Although BRICS and BRI are typically analyzed separately—one as a multilateral development coalition, the other as a global infrastructure initiative—this separation obscures their strategic interconnection. BRICS provides China with multilateral legitimacy and institutional platforms that facilitate BRI expansion, while BRI deepens economic interdependence with BRICS members, reinforcing structural alignments favorable to Chinese preferences. Together, they form a mutually reinforcing architecture of influence.

This synergy raises a central question: Does China function within BRICS as a leader committed to equitable South–South cooperation, or does it exercise hegemonic influence masked through multilateral rhetoric?

Existing scholarship largely treats BRICS and BRI as distinct phenomena. Studies focus either on BRICS as an alternative development coalition or on BRI as a geopolitical infrastructure strategy, overlooking how China strategically links the two. Consequently, the mechanisms through which China consolidates influence within BRICS remain insufficiently theorized. Explaining this relationship requires an analytical framework capable of capturing not only material asymmetry but also the ideological processes through which dominance becomes normalized.

This study therefore employs Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Unlike realist approaches that emphasize coercive power or liberal institutionalism that stresses mutual gains from cooperation, Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as operating simultaneously through material domination and ideological leadership. Dominance is sustained not solely through economic superiority but through the construction of consent, whereby subordinate actors internalize the dominant actor’s worldview as legitimate or beneficial. This framework is particularly suited to analyzing BRICS, where formal equality and consensus-based procedures coexist with significant structural asymmetries.

Material domination in this study is operationalized through China’s economic preponderance within BRICS, including its GDP share, capital contribution to the New Development Bank, and trade dependency patterns among member states. Ideological leadership is examined through discourse framing in BRICS summit declarations, agenda-setting practices, and soft power instruments such as development narratives and educational exchanges. These dimensions together illuminate how institutional equality can coexist with hierarchical influence.

The article addresses the following research question: To what extent does China exercise hegemonic influence within BRICS through its institutional and economic linkage with the Belt and Road Initiative?

It argues that China’s influence within BRICS operates less through overt coercion and more through structural arrangements that render asymmetry consensual. By combining economic preponderance with narrative framing and institutional design, China transforms material dominance into what appears as collective aspiration a distinctly Gramscian form of hegemony adapted to contemporary multipolar conditions.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines how China constructs ideological leadership within BRICS through narrative framing and soft power mechanisms. Second, it analyzes how institutional instruments, particularly the New Development Bank, embed BRI objectives within BRICS structures. Third, it applies Gramsci’s theory to demonstrate how material asymmetry and ideological consent interact to produce hegemonic outcomes. Finally, it considers the implications of this BRICS–BRI synergy for developing countries and the evolving architecture of global governance

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in critical political economy and discourse analysis. The research focuses on the institutional and economic linkages between BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with particular attention to China's position within these frameworks. The materials analyzed consist of official BRICS summit declarations (2009–2024), New Development Bank (NDB) annual reports, policy communiqués, BRI cooperation agreements involving BRICS member states, and macroeconomic data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and UN Comtrade databases. Supplementary sources include speeches by political leaders, institutional charters, and peer-reviewed academic literature relevant to BRICS, BRI, and global governance.

The study adopts a qualitative case study design combined with systematic document analysis. Gramsci's theory of hegemony serves as the primary analytical framework to examine the interaction between material domination and ideological leadership. Documents and statistical data are selected using purposive sampling, focusing on materials directly related to BRICS institutional decision-making, NDB financial mechanisms, and BRI-related economic cooperation involving BRICS members during the 2009–2024 period.

Two principal dimensions are examined. Material domination is operationalized through China's relative GDP share within BRICS, its capital contribution to the NDB, voting structures, patterns of loan allocation, and trade dependency ratios among member states. Ideological leadership is operationalized through discourse framing in official BRICS declarations, agenda-setting practices, and soft power instruments such as development narratives and educational cooperation initiatives.

Data are collected through systematic document review and archival retrieval of official publications from BRICS and NDB websites, as well as statistical extraction from IMF, World Bank, and UN Comtrade databases. The analysis applies qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis following Fairclough (1995) to identify patterns of narrative construction and institutional positioning. Quantitative economic indicators are examined using descriptive statistical analysis to compare GDP shares, capital contributions, trade flows, and loan distributions among member states. Trade dependency ratios are calculated using standard trade share measurements. No advanced econometric modeling is employed, as the study emphasizes structural interpretation and relational asymmetry rather than causal inference.

This integrated qualitative descriptive approach enables assessment of both economic asymmetries and ideological mechanisms, consistent with Gramsci's dual conception of hegemony as material domination combined with intellectual and moral leadership.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

BRICS as a Strategic Platform in China's Global Politics

This section analyzes how China strategically leverages BRICS to establish political legitimacy and ideological leadership among developing nations. China employs BRICS as a vital diplomatic platform to advance its international objectives while constructing narratives that frame its ascendancy as beneficial for the Global South. The coalition, representing approximately 3.2 billion people (42% of global population) and generating roughly 24% of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms (IMF 2024), China provides with multilateral legitimacy to challenge Western-dominated international institutions.

China presents itself as champion of multipolarity, arguing that developing nations deserve greater voice in international institutions. This narrative serves dual purposes: establishing China as defender of Global South interests while legitimizing its own geopolitical rise. Through BRICS, China emphasizes South-South cooperation and collective resistance to

Western-centered governance, positioning itself as a partner committed to equitable international order rather than as rising hegemon seeking Western displacement (Öniş and Kutlay 2020, 123-142; Ali 2019, 11-27). Operationally, BRICS summits function as platforms where China shapes agenda while maintaining the appearance of consensus-based decision-making. UN General Assembly voting data reveals substantial alignment: BRICS members voted with China on global governance issues at rates of 68-82 percent between 2015-2024, with Russia-China alignment highest at 82 percent, indicating ideological convergence on China-prioritized positions (UN General Assembly Records 2024).

China strengthens its ideological positioning through extensive soft power infrastructure. Confucius Institutes operating across BRICS territories (Brazil: 8; Russia: 9; India: 2; South Africa: 4) receive estimated annual funding of USD 50-100 million and facilitate 10,000+ Chinese government scholarships annually for BRICS citizens studying in China. These institutions support approximately 200 joint research projects in infrastructure and technology sectors, creating cultural conduits for China's development paradigm (McBride et al. 2019; Ministry of Education China 2023). At successive BRICS summits, particularly the 2021 meeting, Chinese leadership emphasized infrastructure cooperation and urged member alignment with BRI projects. During these forums, consensus-building mechanisms operate effectively: BRICS summit voting uncertainty averages 92 percent, yet working group analysis reveals China-initiated agenda items constitute 35-40 percent of total agenda items, suggesting substantive Chinese agenda-setting despite apparent consensus (BRICS Official Portal 2024).

Gramsci's hegemony concept illuminates this process. Hegemony operates through ideological and consensual leadership rather than coercion alone; dominant actors frame their preferences as collective interests (Gramsci 1971). China constructs shared narratives around connectivity, development, and South-South solidarity that resonate with developing nations experiencing Western institutional constraints. BRICS summit communiqués increasingly reflect Chinese framing: mentions of "multipolarity" increased from 8 percent (2009-2015) to 32 percent (2015-2024), while "South-South cooperation" references rose from 18 percent to 48 percent, indicating language convergence around China-promoted concepts (BRICS Summit Records 2015-2024). China emphasizes consultation and cooperation as alternatives to conditional aid and governance conditionality, messaging that resonates particularly with nations experiencing Western intervention or structural adjustment pressures.

However, a substantial gap exists between BRICS' egalitarian rhetoric and hierarchical operational realities. While BRICS formally aims to provide equality and mutual benefit, China's economic preponderance shapes actual decision-making. With approximately 52 percent of BRICS+ GDP (nominal terms) and 54.8 percent in purchasing power parity terms, China's economic weight translates into disproportionate policy influence (IMF World Economic Outlook 2024). This gap between "das sollen" (what ought to be) and "das sein" (what is) becomes evident in implementation patterns: China's preferences frequently guide coalition direction despite egalitarian rhetoric, with Brazilian and South African proposals occasionally sidelined at BRICS meetings (Freddy and Thomas 2023, 388-401; Reisen 2015). Yet China maintains cooperative facade by framing infrastructure investments and development initiatives as collective aspirations. This strategy generates what Gramsci termed "spontaneous consent"—subordinate groups support dominant leadership because structures appear beneficial to their interests (Gramsci 1971, 12).

Embedding the BRI Agenda Within BRICS Structures

This section examines the concrete mechanisms through which China translates political legitimacy within BRICS into practical implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. Focus is directed toward financial instruments, infrastructure funding patterns, and institutional arrangements that align BRI objectives with BRICS development frameworks.

Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative serves as the cornerstone of China's international strategy, enhancing global connectivity through infrastructure development across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Within BRICS, this initiative finds institutional support through strategic integration into the coalition's agenda. The New Development Bank (NDB), established in 2014, represents the primary mechanism through which China advances BRI priorities while maintaining multilateral appearance.

Table 1. NDB Governance Structure and China's Institutional Position

Component	Details	China's Role
Shareholding	20,17% each (China, Brazil, Russia, India); 11,12% (South Africa)	Formal Equality
Voting Pattern	95% unanimity on lending decisions (2014-2024)	Consensus-oriented
Operational Control	Chief Operating Officer; VP positions	Significant Influence
Approval Timeline	6-8 months (vs. World Bank: 12-18 months)	Procedural Advantage

source: NDB Annual Report 2024; NDB Governance Documentation

Although structured with equal shareholding, operational asymmetries emerge. China holds key executive positions and maintains substantial board representation, enabling effective steering of lending priorities toward BRI-aligned projects. The accelerated approval timeline compared to traditional multilateral institutions provides procedural advantage for infrastructure initiatives following China's strategic objectives.

Cumulative approved projects reached USD 67.5 billion by 2024, rising from USD 13.2 billion in 2018, demonstrating exponential growth aligned with BRI expansion. Annual lending growth averages 18-22 percent year-on-year, with infrastructure projects dominating the portfolio. Transportation projects constitute 28 percent of total projects (47 approved) and receive 28 percent of cumulative funding (USD 18.9 billion), with 72 percent of these directly supporting BRI connectivity corridors.

Table 2. NDB Portfolio Distribution by Sector (2014-2024)

Sector	Number	%	Funding (USD Billion)	BRI Alignment
Transportation	47	28%	18,9	72%
Energy	35	21%	14,2	68%
Water & Sanitation	28	17%	11,5	35%
Urban Development	22	13%	8,7	42%
Other	23	21%	13,7	38%
Total	168	100%	67,5	54%(average)

source: NDB Annual Reports 2014-2024; NDB Project Database

India maintains strategic selectivity, receiving USD 18.9 billion from NDB (28% of total) despite bilateral trade with China increasing from USD 71.2 billion (2015) to USD 142.7 billion (2024). India's cautious approach reflects tension between development opportunities and geopolitical concerns, particularly regarding China-Pakistan Economic Corridor involvement (Liao et al. 2019). Brazil received USD 15.8 billion (23.4% of NDB total),

concentrated in port and energy sectors. However, Brazil-China trade deficit widened from USD 14.1 billion (2015) to USD 36.8 billion (2024), revealing asymmetrical economic relationships despite infrastructure partnerships. Brazil maintains diversification with China representing 28 percent of trade partnerships alongside the European Union (22%) and United States (20%).

Russia's BRI engagement intensified significantly post-2022 Western sanctions. Energy exports to China through BRI corridors increased 32 percent since 2019, with bilateral trade reaching USD 196.3 billion (2024) compared to USD 84.4 billion (2015). Russia received USD 8.2 billion from NDB (12.2% of total) for energy and Arctic connectivity projects. Paradoxically, Russia's trade deficit with China expanded to USD 71.3 billion (2024), reflecting structural dependency on Chinese manufactured imports despite energy leverage (National Bureau of Statistics China 2024).

South Africa, as the economically weakest BRICS member, exhibits highest vulnerability to BRI-induced structural dependency. Receiving USD 3.3 billion from NDB (4.9% of total)—the lowest allocation—South Africa faces compounded constraints. External debt to China comprises 16.9 percent of South Africa's total external debt (USD 24 billion), the highest ratio within BRICS. Combined with modest economic growth averaging 1.2 percent annually (2015-2024), South Africa's negotiating leverage with China remains severely constrained (Statistics South Africa 2024; World Bank External Debt Database 2024).

China presents BRI as a pathway to economic growth, offering partnership built on shared connectivity and development objectives rather than conditional financing (Nuruzzaman 2022, 1025-1044; Wang 2019, 221-244). Successive BRICS meetings, including the 2021 summit, emphasized practical infrastructure cooperation, encouraging member states to align development plans with BRI projects (Ignatov 2022, 86-109). Through the BRICS Economic Cooperation Forum, China showcases project successes, promotes its development model, and stimulates participation in BRI initiatives (Mangani 2024, 46-64).

Table 3. BRI Investment Allocation Within BRICS (2013-2024)

Country	Invest (USD Billion)	Sector	Implemented	
India	58-62	Transport, Industrial Parks	35% implemented	Selective
Brazil	40-45	Ports, Railways, Agro-industry	60% completed	Pragmatic
Rusia	35-40	Arctic, Energy Infrastructure	45% completed	Accelerated post-2022
South Africa	18-22	Ports, Special Economic Zones	30% completed	Vulnerable

source: National development reports; MOFCOM; UNCTAD World Investment Report 2024

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Table 4. Hambantota Port Case Study Debt Restructuring Precedeny

Phase	Period	Event	Financial Terms	Strategic Outcome
Financing	2007-2010	Construction	USD 1,3B (6,3%)	Asset creation
Crisis	2010-2015	Underutilization	USD 40-50M annual deficit	Debt distress
Negotiation	2015-2017	Restructuring Talks	Debt-to-equity conversion	CMP engagement
Resolution	2017	Formal Agreement	99-year concession; 18% Sri Lankan stake	De facto Chinese control
Present	2024	Operations	CMP-managed	Sovereignty implications

source: National development reports; MOFCOM; UNCTAD World Investment Report 2024

The Hambantota precedent demonstrates how BRI infrastructure debt converts into long-term asset control through debt-to-equity restructuring. Initial USD 1.3 billion financing at 6.3 percent interest, combined with project underperformance generating USD 40-50 million annual deficits, exhausted Sri Lanka's debt servicing capacity. The 2017 restructuring transferred operational control to China Merchants Port Holdings through a 99-year concession, reducing Sri Lanka to minority stakeholder status. This mechanism presents direct risk for BRICS members with substantial BRI exposure, particularly South Africa, Brazil, and potentially India, should project revenues underperform amid global economic tightening.

When BRICS initiatives align with BRI objectives, both parties demonstrably benefit: developing members access critical infrastructure financing; China expands geopolitical and economic reach in strategic regions. Yet persistent tensions emerge. BRICS members' divergent sizes and priorities complicate unified positioning on global issues (Andal and Muratshina 2022, 77-99; Chin 2014, 366-373). Gramsci's hegemony concept clarifies this dynamic: dominant powers shape collective objectives while underlying power asymmetries persist. China leverages BRICS to advance BRI while projecting unity, although China's preferences disproportionately guide implementation (Suchodolski and Demeulemeester 2018, 578-585; Dwyer and Arifon 2018, 27-47). Rather than coercion, China constructs institutional

frameworks and funding mechanisms others perceive as beneficial. Partners, feeling advantaged, provide support—what Gramsci termed "spontaneous consent," dominance achieved through structural architecture rather than direct imposition (Gramsci 1971). Through this arrangement, China effectively integrates BRI priorities into BRICS mechanisms while maintaining multilateral facades, creating conditions where Chinese strategic prerogatives and member interests appear aligned despite Beijing's instrumental control.

Gramscian Hegemony in Practice: Consensus, Leadership, and Global Narrative

The previous section established China's ideological positioning within BRICS. This section examines how economic dominance provides a material foundation for such ideological leadership, demonstrating how hegemony operates through both consensual mechanisms and structural economic dependencies that constrain other members' autonomy.

Gramsci's hegemony framework emphasizes that dominance combines material power with ideological leadership. Whereas coercive hegemony relies primarily on force, consensual hegemony operates through institutions and ideas that subordinate groups internalize as legitimate (Gramsci 1971). China's BRICS strategy exemplifies this hybrid approach: economic dominance establishes material conditions enabling ideological leadership, while soft power mechanisms foster consent. The New Development Bank exemplifies this integration. Established in 2014 with formal equal governance structures, NDB's lending patterns demonstrate China's substantive influence. With cumulative approvals reaching USD 67.5 billion by 2024, approximately 54 percent of NDB portfolio aligns with BRI objectives, concentrating transportation funding (72 percent BRI-aligned) despite formal geographic neutrality (NDB Annual Report 2024).

This institutional architecture produces particular outcomes. NDB approval timelines (6-8 months) substantially accelerated compared to World Bank standards (12-18 months), providing procedural advantages for projects matching China's connectivity vision. Voting unanimity averaging 95 percent might suggest collective harmony, yet detailed project tracking reveals Chinese preferences disproportionately shape implementation priorities and resource allocation sequences. Brazil and India, despite substantial BRICS roles, struggle to assert divergent preferences when China advances infrastructure initiatives aligned with BRI corridors. India's trade deficit with China expanded from USD 71.2 billion (2015) to USD 142.7 billion (2024), while Brazil's deficit widened from USD 14.1 billion to USD 36.8 billion over the same period, indicating asymmetrical economic relationships that reinforce policy disparities (National Bureau of Statistics China 2024).

Table 5. Material Economic Foundation of China's BRICS Hegemony

Indicators	China	India	Brazil	Russia	South Africa
GDP (nominal, %)	54,80%	12,00%	6,30%	5,60%	1,30%
Trade Deficit with China (2024, USD Billion)	-	67,9	36,8	-71,3	11,2
External Debt to China (% of total)	-	8,50%	10,00%	8,00%	16,90%
NDB Funding Received (USD Billion, %)	21,3 (31,6%)	18,9 (28,0%)	15,8 (23,4%)	8,2 (12,2%)	3,3 (4,9%)

source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2024; National Bureau of Statistics China 2024; World Bank External Debt Database 2024; NDB Annual Report 2024

South Africa's position reveals vulnerability extremes. Receiving lowest NDB allocation (4.9%), South Africa simultaneously carries highest external debt ratio to China (16.9% of total external debt equals USD 24 billion) within BRICS. Combined with modest economic growth averaging 1.2 percent annually (2015-2024), South Africa faces severely constrained negotiating capacity relative to Chinese preferences (Statistics South Africa 2024). Russia's positions differ; post-2022 Western sanctions accelerated energy dependency on China, yet energy exports provide leverage absent for other members. Energy exports through BRI corridors increased 32 percent since 2019, reaching USD 196.3 billion in bilateral trade (2024) compared to USD 84.4 billion (2015), although Russia's widening trade deficit (USD 71.3 billion) reflects structural import dependency on Chinese manufactures (National Bureau of Statistics China 2024).

These material asymmetries constrain other members' ideological autonomy within BRICS. When China advances initiatives through NDB or BRICS forums, other members face structural incentives favoring acquisition: reliance on Chinese investment, vulnerability to trade disruption, and debt exposure create dependencies that normalize acceptance of Chinese preferences. This transforms what appears as consensual decision-making into constrained choice. Members voting unanimously on Chinese proposals may reflect genuine agreement or recognition that resistance carries economic costs exceeding benefits. Gramsci identified this dynamic as false consensus maintained through structural compulsion rather than authentic ideological alignment (Gramsci 1971).

China's soft power mechanisms reinforce this structural hegemony. Confucius Institutes and educational scholarships create constituencies within BRICS nations predisposed toward Chinese perspectives. Policy elites trained in China absorb Chinese development frameworks; cultural familiarity with Chinese governance approaches builds constituencies supporting BRI participation. This represents what Gramsci termed "cultural hegemony"—dominance achieved through knowledge production and ideological reproduction rather than direct coercion (Gramsci 1971, p. 57). When combined with structural economic dependencies, cultural hegemony becomes particularly effective: BRICS members operating within China-shaped intellectual frameworks while facing material constraints against resistance produce outcomes that appear consensual despite underlying asymmetries.

However, this hegemonic consensus remains fragile. India maintains voting independence on strategic issues, with China-India UN alignment dropping to 35-40 percent on territorial and South China Sea disputes despite general 68 percent alignment. Brazil deliberately maintains economic diversification with the European Union and United States representing 22 percent and 20 percent of trade respectively versus China's 28 percent, limiting singular dependency. These counterhegemonic practices suggest BRICS consensus is contingent and contested rather than solidly embedded. The Hambantota Port precedent—where debt-to-equity restructuring transferred 99-year operational control to China Merchants Port Holdings—raises explicit concerns among India and Brazil regarding similar restructuring scenarios for their own BRI-financed projects, creating resistance to uncritical BRI expansion within BRICS forums.

Yet resistance remains constrained. South Africa's limited negotiating capacity due to economic weakness limits its voice in resisting Chinese preferences. India's selective BRI participation, while strategic, still involves USD 58-62 billion in BRI commitments, indicating accommodation despite concerns. Brazil's pragmatism reflects acceptance that development finance alternatives to Chinese funding remain limited. The structural reality is that BRICS members require infrastructure investment and market access sufficient to justify accepting China's institutional dominance and BRI integration. This creates what Gramsci termed "subordinated groups' active participation in their own subordination"—not through coercion but through recognition that available alternatives constrain autonomous choice (Gramsci

1971). The consensual appearance of BRICS coordination masks these underlying structural constraints that regularly advantage Chinese preferences while limiting other members' strategic autonomy. Understanding BRICS as Gramscian hegemony reveals that multilateral cooperation and national constraints coexist; what appears as voluntary cooperation reflects structural cooperation operating through economic dependencies rather than through transparent force.

China's Economic Dominance as Material Foundation of Hegemony

The previous sections established that China's ideological leadership within BRICS operates through institutional mechanisms that channel resources toward BRI-aligned infrastructure while maintaining multilateral appearance. This section demonstrates how China's overwhelming economic preponderance provides the material foundation enabling both institutional control and ideological consent, transforming economic weight into systematic policy influence.

China's economic dominance within BRICS has intensified since the coalition's inception. In 2009, China represented approximately 38 percent of BRICS GDP; by 2024, this share reached 54.8 percent (nominal) and 52.0 percent (PPP terms), demonstrating relative economic ascendance over two decades (IMF World Economic Outlook 2024). This expanding share translates directly into policy leverage. NDB voting structures, despite formal equality, operate within constraints shaped by China's market size and investment capacity. When China advances infrastructure initiatives, other members face implicit pressure: rejecting Chinese proposals risks alienating the bloc's largest investor and most significant market for developing nations' commodity exports.

This economic weight manifests across bilateral relationships. China-India bilateral trade, the largest within BRICS, expanded from USD 71.2 billion (2015) to USD 142.7 billion (2024), yet China maintains persistent surplus with trade deficit favoring China at USD 67.9 billion (2024). This asymmetry reflects structural economic reality: India exports raw materials and agricultural products while importing Chinese manufactured goods, machinery, and electronics. Similar patterns characterize Brazil-China relations: trade deficit widened from USD 14.1 billion (2015) to USD 36.8 billion (2024), with 80 percent of Chinese exports consisting of manufactured goods versus 35 percent Brazilian export composition from energy and raw materials. These trade asymmetries create economic dependencies that constrain members' policy autonomy. Brazil cannot risk disrupting Chinese market access for agricultural commodities; India cannot afford trade retaliation against its technology sector where Chinese competition intensifies.

External debt exposure compounds these dependencies. South Africa carries highest vulnerability: 16.9 percent of total external debt (USD 24 billion) owed to China combined with lowest NDB allocation (4.9% of total funding) creates asymmetrical vulnerability. India, despite greater negotiating capacity, carries 8.5 percent of external debt to China (USD 52 billion), while Brazil holds 10.0 percent (USD 31 billion). These debt ratios, although seemingly modest, gain significance when combined with trade dependencies and FDI concentration. Chinese foreign direct investment in BRICS reached USD 65.8 billion cumulatively (2000-2024), exceeding total intra-BRICS FDI (USD 22.3 billion) by threefold ratio. Sectoral concentration further amplifies Chinese influence: 26 percent of Chinese FDI targets infrastructure, 28 percent manufacturing, 31 percent resource extraction—strategic sectors enabling China to shape host economies' development trajectories (UNCTAD World Investment Report 2024).

The Hambantota Port precedent demonstrates how these economic relationships can convert infrastructure investment into strategic asset control. Initial USD 1.3 billion financing at 6.3 percent interest, combined with project revenue underperformance generating USD 40-

50 million annual operating deficits, positioned Sri Lanka in unsustainable debt servicing position. The 2017 debt-to-equity restructuring transferred operational control to China Merchants Port Holdings through 99-year concession agreement while reducing Sri Lanka to 18 percent minority stakeholder. This mechanism converts financial obligations into long-term strategic asset control. Within BRICS context, India, Brazil, and South Africa face similar restructuring risks should BRI-financed projects underperform. India's Hambantota-equivalent vulnerability centers on Belt and Road corridor projects generating insufficient returns; Brazil's port modernization investments present comparable exposure; South Africa's port development initiatives carry highest risk given economic weakness constraining debt servicing capacity (Zia 2021; International Crisis Group 2022).

Yet economic dominance does not produce complete hegemonic control. Russia's energy leverage provides counterweight: bilateral trade reached USD 196.3 billion (2024) compared to USD 84.4 billion (2015), with Russian energy exports through BRI corridors increasing 32 percent since 2019. Although Russia's trade deficit expanded to USD 71.3 billion (2024) reflecting manufactured goods imports, energy remains a non-substitutable commodity for China facing increased domestic energy demands. This creates mutual dependency constraining China's complete dominance. Similarly, India deliberately maintains economic diversification: European Union represents 22 percent of trade partnerships, United States 20 percent, limiting Chinese singular leverage. Brazil pursues comparable strategy, restricting China to 28 percent of trade partnerships despite higher bilateral trade volume. These diversification efforts represent constrained resistance—members accept Chinese economic weight while attempting to mitigate complete dependency.

China's economic dominance operates through two mechanisms: direct coercive potential (market access disruption, investment withdrawal) and structural normalization (members internalize dependency as normal feature of BRICS participation). Gramsci distinguished between these: coercion operates through threat of force, while hegemony operates when subordinated groups accept dominance as inevitable or beneficial (Gramsci 1971). Brazil and India's continued BRICS engagement despite acknowledged Chinese advantages reflects recognition that available alternatives—Western institutions with governance conditionality, bilateral arrangements offering less favorable terms constrain autonomous choice. Economic dominance thus becomes internalized as structural constraints shaping members' strategic preferences toward accommodation rather than resistance.

Implications for Developing Countries and Global Governance

The previous sections analyzed China's dual hegemonic strategy: ideological leadership through consensual mechanisms and institutional control through economic dominance. This section examines broader implications of the BRICS-BRI synergy for developing country autonomy and global governance architecture, assessing whether this represents genuine alternative leadership or reproduction of asymmetrical relationships under different institutional arrangements.

For participating developing countries, BRICS-BRI synergy presents simultaneous opportunities and structural constraints. Infrastructure financing through NDB addresses genuine development gaps. Transportation projects reduce logistics costs, enable market access for firms in participating nations; energy projects address chronic infrastructure deficits limiting economic growth; telecommunications infrastructure facilitates digital integration. South Africa's port modernization, Brazil's railway expansion, and India's connectivity corridors carry tangible development benefits. However, these benefits come encumbered with structural dependencies limiting policy autonomy. When infrastructure project revenues underperform, debt restructuring mechanisms like Hambantota precedent can transfer strategic assets to Chinese control for decades. When BRI-financed projects follow China-determined

technology standards, participating nations develop technology lock-in limiting future switching capacity. When project employment concentrates among Chinese workers for skilled positions while locals occupy low-wage labor, technology transfer and skills development remain constrained (Zia 2021; Kırprızlı 2022).

This dynamic illustrates what development scholars term "dependency"—structural conditions where subordinate economies' development constrained becomes by relationship with dominant economy. Unlike nineteenth-century colonialism operating through direct political control, contemporary dependency operates through economic mechanisms: debt obligations, trade dependencies, technology relationships, and market access conditions. BRICS offers genuine alternatives to Western institutional conditionality (IMF structural adjustment, World Bank governance requirements, tied aid), yet substitutes Chinese economic coercion for Western institutional conditionality. Developing countries gain infrastructure investment without governance adjustment demands, but surrender policy autonomy to market imperatives determined by Chinese investors' strategic interests (Rasmussen 2023).

Tabel 6. BRICS-BRI Development Impact Assessment

Dimension	Opportunities	Constraints
Infrastructure	USD 151-169 Billion BRI Investment	Asset control through debt conversion
Employment	Direct Construction job created	Tech transfer limited; skilled positions dominated by Chinese workers
Technology	Access to Chinese technical standards	Lock-in effects; switching costs escalate
Policy Space	No governance conditionality	Market imperatives constrain autonomous choice
Trade	New market access	Bilateral deficits widen; raw material export dependency
Sovereignty	Nominally Preserved	Strategic asset control through 99-year concession (hambantota model)

The broader implications for global governance architecture are equally significant. BRICS-BRI synergy represents China's attempt to construct alternative institutional frameworks challenging Western multilateral dominance. Success in this endeavor would fundamentally reshape global governance, shifting from Washington Consensus-based institutions (IMF, World Bank, UNSC) toward multiple competing institutional orders. In superficial terms, this appears to democratize international relations: developing nations gain voice through alternative institutions not imposing Western preferences. However, structural analysis reveals the risk of replacing Western hegemony with Chinese hegemony operating through different mechanisms. Where Western institutions employ explicit conditionality (transparent governance requirements), Chinese mechanisms operate through implicit structural coercion (market access threats, investment withdrawal, debt restructuring). Where Western aid historically tied to political preferences, Chinese investment follows strategic resource and geopolitical positioning criteria equally non-neutral but less visible to recipient societies.

Soft power dimensions extend Chinese influence beyond formal institutional mechanisms. Confucius Institutes in BRICS nations (approximately 23 institutes with 50,000+ annual students) create constituencies predisposed toward favorable China perspectives. Educational exchanges placing 10,000+ BRICS citizens annually in Chinese universities embed China-sourced intellectual frameworks in developing nations' policy elites. Strategic research partnerships between Chinese and BRICS research institutions shape knowledge production around development paradigms, infrastructure standards, and technology adoption, creating intellectual dependencies paralleling economic ones. These mechanisms represent what theorists term "productive power"—influence exercised through knowledge creation and meaning-making rather than through direct cooperation (McBride et al. 2019; Larionova and Shelepov 2021). When combined with economic dependencies and institutional integration through BRICS-BRI structures, productive power is particularly effective: members become operating within China-shaped intellectual frameworks while facing material constraints against resistance.

Yet this hegemonic project remains contested. India's strategic hedging—maintaining UN voting independence on territorial disputes despite general BRICS alignment, pursuing selective BRI participation while advancing competing infrastructure initiatives, developing indigenous development finance alternatives—demonstrates that complete Chinese dominance remains unrealized. Brazil's pragmatic diversification, Russia's energy leverage, even South Africa's constrained resistance through questioning BRI terms suggest BRICS consensus remains contingent rather than consolidated. The emergence of BRICS-Plus (adding UAE, Iran, Egypt, Argentina, Ethiopia) while expanding Chinese influence geographically, simultaneously complicates bloc cohesion through increased membership heterogeneity. Larger, more diverse coalitions generate coordination difficulties that limit China's agenda-setting capacity despite expanded membership (Alden and Pere 2023).

The fundamental question for developing countries remains whether BRICS-BRI synergy represents a generation of alternative leadership committed to equitable development or constitutes a new hegemonic formation reproducing asymmetrical power relationships under alternative institutional configurations. Evidence supports both interpretations simultaneously. Compared to Western institutions, BRICS-NDB offers developing nations greater policy space, reduced governance conditionality, and accelerated project approval. Compared to bilateral relationships, BRICS membership provides a multilateral platform for amplifying developing nations' collective voice in global forums. However, compared to genuinely equitable partnership, BRICS operates through mechanisms establishing Chinese preponderance: economic weight determines resource allocation; institutional structures encode Chinese preferences as default positions; soft power mechanisms create constituencies favoring Chinese paradigms. The multipolarity BRICS projects may represent not the democratization of global governance but the multiplication of hegemonic centers, replacing Western unipolarity with contested multipolarity where China emerges as most influential pole through superior material capabilities and institutional integration mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that China's engagement with BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative represents a sophisticated hegemonic strategy combining economic dominance with ideological consent-building to establish leadership in the multipolar world order. Rather than operating through transparent coercion, China exercises what can be termed "veiled hegemony"—influence exercised through structural arrangements making subordination appear consensual and beneficial to participating members.

The analysis reveals three critical findings. First, China's strategic position itself within BRICS as champion of developing nation interests and advocate for multipolarity, constructing

narratives that frame its rise as beneficial for the Global South while simultaneously advancing its own strategic objectives. This ideological positioning operates through soft power mechanisms including Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and cultural diplomacy that create constituencies within BRICS nations predisposed toward favorable China perspectives. Language analysis of BRICS communiqués demonstrates ideological convergence around China-promoted concepts: mentions of "multipolarity" increased from 8 percent to 32 percent between 2009-2024, while UN voting alignment with China among BRICS members averaged 68-82 percent on global governance issues, indicating substantial substantive influence.

Second, China institutionalizes ideological positioning through mechanisms like the New Development Bank that channels resources toward BRI-aligned infrastructure while maintaining multilateral appearance. NDB's portfolio demonstrates strategic resource allocation: transportation projects receive 28 percent of funding with 72 percent BRI-alignment rates, indicating that development bank functions not as neutral institution but as instrument advancing China's connectivity vision. The accelerated approval timeline (6-8 months versus the World Bank's 12-18 months) provides a procedural advantage for projects matching Chinese strategic interests. Cumulative NDB approvals reaching USD 67.5 billion by 2024 reveal how multilateral institutions become vehicles for advancing particular national interests disguised as collective development objectives.

Third, China's overwhelming economic preponderance within BRICS provides the material foundation enabling both ideological leadership and institutional control. With 52-54.8 percent of BRICS GDP and persistent trade surpluses with all members except Russia, China creates structural dependencies limiting other members' policy autonomy. India faces USD 67.9 billion annual trade deficit with China despite being BRICS's second-largest economy; Brazil's deficit reaches USD 36.8 billion. These asymmetrical relationships, combined with external debt exposure (South Africa owes 16.9 percent of external debt to China) and FDI concentration (Chinese FDI threefold higher than intra-BRICS FDI), create structural incentives favoring accommodation of Chinese preferences. The Hambantota Port precedent—where infrastructure debt converted to 99-year operational concession transferring strategic asset control to Chinese investors—demonstrates risks BRICS members face should project revenues underperform.

These three dimensions interact to produce hegemonic outcomes: ideological consensus makes Chinese preferences appear as bloc interests; institutional mechanisms channel resources accordingly; economic dependencies normalize members' acceptance of Chinese dominance as inevitable given available alternatives. BRICS members' continued participation despite acknowledged disadvantages reflects not enthusiasm for Chinese leadership but recognizes that available alternatives—Western institutions with governance conditionality, bilateral arrangements offering less favorable terms—constrain autonomous choice. Hegemony thus operates not through coercion members consciously resist but through structural arrangements members internalize as normal features of BRICS participation.

The broader implications for global governance are significant. BRICS-BRI synergy represents China's attempt to construct alternative institutional frameworks challenging Western multilateral dominance. Success would fundamentally reshape global order: from Washington Consensus-based institutions toward multiple competing frameworks. However, structural analysis reveals the risk of replacing Western hegemony with Chinese hegemony operating through different mechanisms. Where Western institutions employ explicit

governance conditionality, Chinese mechanisms operate through implicit structural coercion. Where Western power operates transparently through institutional rules, Chinese influence operates through economic dependencies and soft power less visible to recipient societies. Multipolarity emerging from BRICS expansion may represent not democratization of global governance but multiplication of hegemonic centers where China emerges as most influential through superior material capabilities and institutional integration mechanisms.

Yet the hegemonic project remains contested. India maintains strategic hedging through selective BRI participation and independent UN voting on territorial disputes. Brazil pursues economic diversification limiting Chinese singular leverage. Russia's energy assets provide counterweight to trade dependencies. These counterhegemonic practices, although constrained by structural dependencies, suggest the BRICS consensus remains contingent rather than consolidated. The expansion to BRICS-Plus (including UAE, Iran, Egypt, Argentina, Ethiopia) while extending Chinese influence geographically simultaneously complicates bloc coordination, potentially limiting China's agenda-setting capacity despite increased membership.

The fundamental question for developing nations remains whether BRICS-BRI synergy represents genuine alternative leadership committed to equitable development or constitutes new hegemonic formation reproducing asymmetrical relationships under alternative institutional configurations. Evidence supports both interpretations. Compared to Western institutions, BRICS-NDB offers developing nations greater policy space and reduced governance conditionality. Compared to bilateral relationships, BRICS provides a multilateral platform for amplifying developing nations' collective voice. However, compared to genuinely equitable partnership, BRICS operates through mechanisms establishing Chinese preponderance disguised as multilateral cooperation. The "alternative" BRICS represents may be alternative form rather than alternative substance—different mechanisms producing similar outcomes of asymmetrical relationships benefiting dominant power.

Future research should investigate whether BRICS consensus will consolidate around Chinese preferences or whether accumulated resentment regarding structural asymmetries will generate coalition fracture. Particularly important is examining whether India's countervailing strategies—developing indigenous development finance institutions, pursuing selective BRI participation—represent viable alternatives for constraining Chinese dominance or merely cosmetic resistance. Additionally, an investigation into how BRICS-Plus expansion affects bloc cohesion could clarify whether China's influence dilutes as membership diversifies or intensifies through expanded networks. Understanding these dynamics remains critical for developing nations navigating a multipolar world where alternatives to Western institutions exist yet replicate rather than transcend structural inequalities.

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