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

**Benedictus Halleyando Muji<sup>1\*</sup>, Reni Windiani<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of International Relations, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia.

\*Corresponding Author: [haleando.ha010@gmail.com](mailto:haleando.ha010@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This article analyzes how China strategically uses the BRICS as a tool to launch the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strengthen the influence in global governance. The target of this study is to explain how China became the dominant (hegemonic) leader in this group through the institutional mechanisms. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony, this study observes that China's power stems is not only from the material strength but also from an ideological perspective, on how they lead the ideas or the concepts. This study uses qualitative methods based on document analysis such as official reports, summit declaration, and relevant literature. This study shows the existence of three interrelated mechanisms. First, China spreads the narrative that the world shouldn't be dominated by a single country and that cooperation among developing country is necessary. Second, China advances its agenda through the BRICS financial institution, the New Development Bank. Through this bank, many projects aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative's connectivity goals are funded. Third, China's economic dominance has made other BRICS countries structurally dependent, such as due to trade imbalances, infrastructure financing from BRI projects, and external debts to Chinese lenders. Consequently, if any countries challenged the Chinese-backed policies, they could face significant economic risks. This study also concludes that this institutional cooperation doesn't eliminate hegemony in the global system but only changes its form

**Keyword:** Belt and Road Initiative; BRICS; China Hegemony; Gramsci Theory; Institution Domination; Global Governance; Development Finance; Soft Power

### INTRODUCTION

During the previous decade, BRICS has changed the balance of power in a big way, becoming one of the most powerful groups of developing countries. BRICS was created in 2009 and grew to include the South Africa in 2011. The goals were clear: to promote economic

cooperation among developing countries, push for changes in global governance, and question the authority of Westernize International organizations. BRICS has lot of economic powe, it includes about 3.2 billion people and accounts about 24% of the world's GDP in terms of purchasing power parity. China is in a unique position of power in this group. Not only is it the biggest economy, but it's also the strategic architect that shapes the bloc's direction toward its own geopolitical goals

China started the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) in 2013 to help build infrastructure and connect individuals across more than 140 countries. The BRI is worth more than \$1 trillion. People usually look at the BRICS and the BRI as two separate things: the BRICS as a group of countries working together to develop and the BRI as the global infrastructure project. However, this separation hides the strategic links between the two. BRICS offers China multilateral status and an institutional base helping the BRI flourish. Meanwhile, the BRI deepens China's economic ties with BRICS partners, solidifying structural synergies favoring China's agenda. Collectively, both form a framework of leverage where each initiative strengthens the other to advance China's global power projection.

This dynamic prompt a critical inquiry: Does China lead the BRICS collective with a genuine commitment to egalitarian partnership, or does it utilize multilateral rhetoric to mask its pursuit of hegemonic authority? Existing literature frequently treats the BRICS and the BRI as distinct entities. Certain studies highlight the BRICS as a counter-developmental alliance, while others view the BRI as a geopolitical framework for infrastructure, often overlooking China's tactical fusion of both initiatives. Consequently, the mechanisms through which China consolidates its influence within the BRICS remain largely obscured. Understanding this connection necessitates an analytical lens that evaluates both the imbalance of material capabilities and the ideological frameworks that sustain such preeminence.

as a result, this study utilizes Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony. Gramsci sees hegemony as a process that happens at the same time through material domination and ideological leadership. This is different from realist approaches that focus on coercive power or liberal institutionalism that focus on the benefits of cooperation. Domination is maintained not solely through the economic dominance, but through the construction of consensus where weaker actors accept the dominant actor's worldview as legitimate or beneficial. This framework is particularly appropriate for analyzing BRICS, where formal equality and consensus-based procedures coexist with significant structural asymmetries

In this study, material dominance is measured through China's economic GDP Share , capital contributions to the New Development Bank, and the patterns of trade inter dependence among member states. Discursive framing in BRICS summit declarations, agenda-setting practices, and soft power tools like development narratives and educational exchanges are used to study ideological leadership. These dimensions collectively illustrate how institutional equality can coexist with hierarchical influence.

This research answers the following research question: To what extent does China exert hegemonic influence within the BRICS through the institutional and economic linkages with the Belt and Road Initiative? The study argues that China's influence within the BRICS operate not through overt coercion, but through structural arrangements that make inequality appear as if it were mutually agreed upon. With the combination of economic superiority and narrative framing and institutional design, china transforms material dominance into what appears to be

collective aspiration, a form of hegemony typical of Gramsci's thinking adapted to contemporary multipolar conditions.

The order of this research's systematics is: First, talk about how China uses narrative framing and soft power to build ideological leadership within BRICS. Second, this study analyzes how institutional instruments, especially the New Development Bank, embed BRI objectives into the BRICS structure. Third, this study applies Gramsci's theory to demonstrate how material inequality and ideological consensus interact to produce a form of hegemony. Finally, this study also considers the implication of this BRICS-BRI synergy for developing countries and the emerging global governance architecture.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative research design based on critical political economy and discourse analysis. Focus of the study is on the institutional and economic linkages between BRICS and BRI, with attention to China's position within the framework. The data that has been analyzed include official declarations of the BRICS Summits for the 2009-2024 period, annual reports of the New Development Bank (NDB), policy communiqués, BRI cooperation agreements involving BRICS member countries, and macroeconomic data from the data bases of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and UN Comtrade. Other supporting sources include speeches by political leaders, institutional charters, and peer-reviewed academic literature relevant to the topics of BRICS, BRI, and global governance.

This Research uses a qualitative methods with systematic document analysis. Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony Theory used as the main analytical framework to examine the relationship between material domination and ideological leadership. Documents and statistical data were selected carefully, focusing on material directly related to BRICS institutional decision making, the NDB financial reports, and BRI-related economic cooperation involving BRICS members during the period of 2009-2024.

In examining China's influence, this study highlights two strategic pillars. The primary pillar focuses on material dominance as measured by China's large proportion of GDP within the BRICS, its capital contribution for the NDB and its influence in decision making structures and loan distribution patterns. The second pillar focuses on ideological leadership. This analysis examines how China sets the shared agenda. In addition, China also utilizes soft power instruments such as spreading development narratives and educational cooperation to build legitimacy for its influence at the global level.

The data collection process in this study was conducted comprehensively by compiling official documents and publications from the BRICS and NDB websites. Researchers also use the macrostatistical data from credible international databases, including the IMF, World Bank, and UN Comtrade. In analyzing the data, the researcher applied qualitative content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis, the aim of which was to map the narrative construction patterns and examine the institutional positions of the actors within them.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **BRICS as a Strategic Platform in China's Global Politics**

This section studying on how China strategically used the BRICS to build the political legitimacy and ideological leadership among developing countries. China uses BRICS as the crucial diplomatic platform to bring forward its international objectives while constructing a

narrative that represents its rise as beneficial to the countries of the Global South. Representing roughly 3.2 billion individuals, or 42% of the world's population, and contributing nearly 24% of global GDP via purchasing power parity, this alliance offers China multilateral credibility to contest international organizations currently led by Western nations.

Beijing portrays itself as the primary advocate for a multipolar world, asserting that emerging nations require a more significant influence within global organizations. This rhetoric functions twofold: it casts China as the champion of Global South interests while justifying its own expanding geopolitical role. Within BRICS, China highlights South-South collaboration and shared opposition to Western-led frameworks, presenting itself as a dedicated ally for a balanced global system rather than a successor hegemon aiming to displace Western authority.

In practice, BRICS summits provide a stage where China shapes the narrative while preserving a facade of collective, consensus-driven leadership. Analysis of UN General Assembly voting reveals a notable synchronization; between 2015 and 2024, BRICS nations aligned with Chinese positions on global governance 68% to 82% of the time, with Russia showing the strongest agreement at 82%. This trend reflects a growing ideological harmony regarding China's strategic priorities.

China further bolsters its ideological reach through a vast soft power network. Operating throughout the BRICS bloc, Confucius Institutes benefit from \$50–\$100 million in yearly funding and manage over 10,000 Chinese government scholarships for BRICS students annually. Furthermore, these centers facilitate roughly 200 collaborative research initiatives in technology and infrastructure, establishing a channel for cultural diplomacy that advances the Chinese developmental model.

Cooperation on infrastructure has remained a central theme for China during BRICS summits, particularly during the 2021 session. Beijing has consistently advocated for aligning BRICS policies with projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consensus-building within these forums appears highly effective, with member states reaching agreement on roughly 92% of decisions. Nevertheless, closer examination suggests that approximately 35% to 40% of the discussed agenda items actually originate from proposals previously introduced by China.

These statistics were derived from a qualitative examination of diverse BRICS Summit communiqués and working group documentation spanning 2015 to 2024. Within this research, a specific agenda point was classified as a “China initiative” if its initial mention occurred in a formal Chinese state policy document, a Chinese delegation's speech during a BRICS meeting, or an official proposal tabled by a Chinese official. This ratio was subsequently determined by measuring the quantity of agenda topics stemming from Chinese proposals against the aggregate agenda items discussed throughout every summit sequence.

From a Gramscian viewpoint, supremacy is manifested not just via physical strength or force, but also through ideological guidance that establishes shared agreement. Leading powers generally do not overtly mandate their agendas but instead present them as being consistent with the public interest. In this framework, China is seeking to build a shared discourse regarding international linkage, growth, and cooperation. This rhetoric is quite easily embraced by several emerging states, particularly those that have historically experienced restricted entry to or coercion from global organizations controlled by Western powers.

Official BRICS summit statements throughout late years have progressively exhibited a thematic structure that corresponds with the discourse frequently championed by China. This is apparent in the rising employment of expressions like multipolarity, which in formal records climbed from roughly 8% during the 2009–2015 era to 32% during the 2015–2024 era. A comparable pattern is likewise observed for the phrase South-South cooperation, which jumped from 18% to 48%. This growth signifies a pattern of verbal alignment in BRICS records, shifting toward ideas that have been extensively advocated by China since the beginning.

Moreover, China steadily stresses the significance of dialogue and partnership as a substitute method for global assistance, which usually arrives with various ideological and administrative requirements frequently linked to Western nations. This discourse is quite easily welcomed by various emerging economies, notably those with past encounters involving Western interference or economic reform mandates that are viewed as limiting internal policy freedom.

Nevertheless, a distinct disconnect exists between the egalitarian rhetoric frequently shared in BRICS forums and the group's operational reality. On paper, BRICS highlights the ideals of equality and mutual advantages for every member state. In reality, however, China's economic supremacy maintains a substantial impact on the decision-making process. By commanding roughly 52% of the total nominal GDP of BRICS+ and approximately 54.8% based on purchasing power parity, China's economic standing naturally bolsters its power to shape policy priorities in the coalition.

Within this framework, one can observe a discrepancy between *das sollen* (the normative ideal) and *das sein* (the practical reality). Even as BRICS verbally promotes member equality, China's strategic preferences frequently dictate the direction of the alliance. During various summits, for instance, initiatives proposed by Brazil or South Africa do not always gain the same level of priority in agenda negotiations.

Regardless, China manages to uphold an image of unified cooperation by presenting different programs, especially development projects and infrastructure investments—as reflecting the collective goals of all member states. This approach corresponds with Antonio Gramsci's concept of spontaneous consent, a state in which subordinate entities persist in supporting a dominant leader because they perceive the current system as being beneficial to their own interests.

### **Embedding the BRI Agenda Within BRICS Structures**

The Belt and Road Initiative, which runs from Asia to Africa and Europe, was launched in 2013 as China's main way to build infrastructure around the world. The New Development Bank (NDB), which was set up in 2014, has helped the BRI become a part of the BRICS. China uses the NDB to direct development priorities that are in line with the BRI while still making it look like BRICS member countries are working together. Chin (2014) noted that the NDB was envisioned not solely as a development lender but as a conduit for emerging economies to collaboratively redefine global development finance, a framework that China has consistently utilized to integrate its connectivity agenda into the institution's operational framework.

The NDB's formal shareholding structure gives all founding members equal ownership, but in practice, there are still operational imbalances. China has a lot of board representation and holds a number of important executive positions. This gives it a say in funding priorities

that can't be fully captured by shareholding ratios alone (Duggan et al., 2022). Table 1 shows how the NDB is run and where China fits into it.

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

Components	Details	China's Role
<b>Share Ownership</b>	20.17% (Brazil, Russia, China, and India) 11.12% (South Africa)	Equal to other shareholders (e.g., SA)
<b>Voting Patterns</b>	95% Unanimous agreement on loan decisions	Consensus oriented
<b>Operational Control</b>	Chief Operating Officer (COO) and VP	Significant influence
<b>Approval Timeline</b>	6-8 months (World Bank 12-18 months)	Excellent governance

source: NDB Annual Report 2024; NDB Governance Documentation (About NDB website)

Apart from its structural makeup, the NDB's management framework diverges from conventional multilateral creditors in another analytically vital way: the lack of political prerequisites. Entities like the World Bank and the IMF have long linked governance, anti-corruption, and policy overhaul mandates to their lending terms. stipulations many emerging nations view as overbearing or a threat to sovereignty (Chin, 2014). Conversely, the NDB functions on a non-interventionist doctrine regarding internal policy, providing infrastructure capital without requesting regulatory shifts or institutional reorganization. Although this strategy is officially presented as a tribute to national independence, it also lowers the political stakes for member nations accepting NDB-backed initiatives, including those consistent with BRI goals. In Gramscian language, this organizational blueprint does not just speed up agreement, it structurally removes the tension that might otherwise lead member states to examine the conditions of partnership (Munir & Abid, 2024). The consequence is an institutional setting where BRI-compatible BRICS can establish agendas without triggering the political pushback typically associated with conditional Western funding.

The NDB's sanctioned project list has expanded significantly, from roughly USD 13.2 billion in 2018 to USD 67.5 billion in 2024. The NDB anticipates loan growth of 18% to 22% annually (NDB Annual Report, 2024). Infrastructure ventures comprise the bulk of this list, with transport representing the primary category. There are 47 ventures in this field, accounting for 28% of the total authorized funding (USD 18.9 billion). Roughly 72% of these transport ventures are crucial because they explicitly bolster connectivity pathways that belong to the BRI. The full sectoral breakdown and BRI integration throughout the NDB's list are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Distribution of NDB Portfolio by Sector and Alignment with BRI**

Sectors	Number	%	Financing (Billion USD)	BRI Alignment
<b>Transportation</b>	47	28%	18,9	72%

Sectors	Number	%	Financing (Billion USD)	BRI Alignment
Energy	35	21%	14,2	68%
Water and Sanitation	28	17%	11,5	35%
Development	22	13%	8,7	42%
Others	23	21%	13,7	38%
<b>Total</b>	168	100%	67,5	54% (Average)

Source: NDB Annual Reports 2024

The synergy between NDB lending and BRI targets transcends simple statistics; it is clearly demonstrated through specific project investments across BRICS countries. South Africa’s Durban Container Terminal Berth Reconstruction Project supports BRI maritime connectivity objectives within the Indian Ocean, a vital component of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Similarly, NDB-backed upgrades to Brazil’s Carajás Railway and Ponta da Madeira Port Terminal align with China’s ambition to link South American commodity hubs to the broader BRI network (Weber, 2024). Since 2022, Russian NDB allocations have shifted toward Arctic energy systems and terrestrial routes linked to the Polar Silk Road, a formal BRI corridor. These examples illustrate that the 72% BRI alignment within transportation is not incidental; it reflects a systematic project selection process that prioritizes infrastructure matching China’s strategic geography. This trend mirrors Gramsci’s theory of institutional routinization, where a lead actor's preferences become embedded in organizational habits, eventually appearing as neutral operational standards instead of direct power plays (Munir & Abid, 2024).

The structural consequences of this financial framework vary by member state, yet they adhere to a consistent logic: economic vulnerability directly limits a member's capacity to challenge or modify terms favoring the BRI. Table 3 illustrates these interdependencies among BRICS nations, utilizing statistics from the IMF, World Bank, and NDB.

**Tabel 3. Indicators of Dependency Between BRICS Member Countries**

Indicators	China	India	Brazil	Russia	South Africa
GDP (nominal, %)	54,8%	12%	6,3%	5,6%	1,3%
Trade with China (2024, USD Billion)	-	142,7	Def +36,8	196,3	Def +11,2
External Debt to China (% of Total)	-	8,5%	10%	8%	16,9%
NDB Funding Received (USD Billion, %)	21,3 (31,6%)	18,9 (28%)	15,8% (23,4%)	8,2 (12,2%)	3,3 (4,9%)
BRI Exposure (USD Billion)	-	58-62	40-45	35-40	18-22

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

Several patterns emerge from this comparison. India remains deeply integrated into China's trade ecosystem, with bilateral exchange hitting USD 142.7 billion in 2024. Nevertheless, a structural imbalance persists as India primarily imports manufactured items while exporting raw materials and agricultural goods. Brazil's trade deficit with China climbed from USD 14.1 billion in 2015 to USD 36.8 billion in 2024, reflecting a commodity-for-manufactures dynamic that aligns with structural dependency trends in development research (George & Shanmugam, 2022). Russia's post-2022 trajectory exemplifies accelerated dependency: energy exports via BRI corridors jumped 32% since 2019, and by 2024, its trade deficit with China reached USD 71.3 billion. This underscores the structural hazards of over-reliance on a single partner during geopolitical strain. South Africa appears most vulnerable, receiving the lowest NDB funding (USD 3.3 billion, 4.9%), holding the highest external debt to China (16.9%), and averaging just 1.2% annual growth from 2015 to 2024. As Muzindutsi and Obalade (2020) argue, South Africa's bond market reacts sharply to country risk shocks. This immediately increases borrowing costs and restricts government spending, thereby weakening South Africa's negotiating leverage within the BRICS framework.

The aforementioned financing patterns carry inherent risks associated with what literature defines as debt-trap dynamics. This concept describes scenarios where debtor nations, unable to service high-interest infrastructure debt, must renegotiate terms that often grant creditors control over vital assets (Akram et al., 2025). Such risks are not anomalies within BRICS; instead, they represent systemic vulnerability pathways central to the political economy of development finance linked to the BRI. South Africa's heavy debt, stagnant growth, and financial market sensitivity epitomize these conditions (Muzindutsi & Obalade, 2020). Similarly, Brazil's fiscal path and public debt trends under specific macroeconomic pressures may heighten its reliance on external funding (George & Shanmugam, 2022; Waheed et al., 2024). China's position as a structural creditor ensures that project failures trigger contractual clauses favoring the lender, effectively facilitating a non-coercive transfer of sovereignty over strategic infrastructure.

Table 4 outlines the total BRI investment distribution among BRICS nations, highlighting the magnitude and sectoral focus of China's infrastructure footprint within the alliance.

**Table 4. BRI Investment Allocation in BRICS**

Countries	Investment (Billion USD)	Sector	Implementation	Exposure
India	58-62	Transportation, Industrial	35% Implemented	Selective
Brazil	40-45	Ports, Railways, Agricultural Industry	60% Completed	Pragmatic
Rusia	35-40	Energy Infrastructure (Polar)	45% Completed	Accelerated post 2022
Afrika Selatan	18-22	Ports, EEZ	30% Completed	Vulnerable
<b>Total</b>	151-169	-	42% (average)	-

*Source: NDB Annual Reports 2024*

The structural power of BRICS development finance, as defined by Duggan et al. (2022), is formed by the NDB's institutional setup, the lack of policy conditions, the focus on BRI-related sectors, and established dependency trends. Rather than employing coercion, China developed institutional systems and funding tools that other members embraced for their own utility. This mirrors Gramscian "spontaneous consent," where authority is secured through established structures rather than overt pressure. The narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), presented at BRICS summits as a tool for Southern connectivity and partnership, provides the necessary legitimacy for these material systems. By embedding BRI goals into BRICS while upholding a multilateral facade, China ensures its strategic aims seem to match those of other members, even as it exerts disproportionate policy control (Carrai et al., 2020). This integration of the BRI into BRICS does not happen through one single channel, but via a blend of institutional structure, financial rewards, and conceptual framing, creating a sophisticated process that standardizes China's infrastructure priorities within the group's collective governance.

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

Within the framework of Antonio Gramsci's theories, hegemony is split into two categories: coercive power exercised through force, and consensual power established via norms, institutions, and beliefs that subordinates eventually view as valid or beneficial. China's approach within BRICS mirrors this consensual model. As discussed earlier, China has constructed an institutional architecture involving the NDB's unconditional loans, project alignment with the BRI, and specific rhetoric at BRICS summits. These elements generate agreement without requiring physical pressure. This part analyzes how these combined mechanisms produce a durable, resilient hegemony that appears voluntary because its foundations seem cooperative (Munir & Abid, 2024).

The institutional side of this agreement is clearest in NDB governance. While the bank formally operates on consensus-based voting and equal shares, boasting a 95% approval rate, the alignment between NDB funding and BRI goals suggests that consensus does not equate to equal leverage. Duggan et al. (2022) argue that the structural layout of BRICS development finance creates lopsided incentives: supporting China-centric plans carries lower economic risk than resisting them. Consequently, what look like collective choices may actually be rational calculations made under structural constraints rather than genuine ideological harmony. This reflects the Gramscian concept of consent derived from a perceived lack of viable alternatives rather than pure persuasion.

Beyond institutions, China solidifies its dominance through various soft power channels. Confucius Institutes in BRICS nations receive USD 50 to 100 million annually, facilitating over 10,000 government scholarships and roughly 200 collaborative research projects in tech and infrastructure (van Noort, 2019). These are not merely diplomatic tools; they shape the intellectual framework through which BRICS technocrats and elites interpret governance, connectivity, and development. In a Gramscian sense, this represents cultural hegemony: authority maintained through knowledge production and ideological spread rather than coercion (Munir & Abid, 2024). When combined with economic reliance, this influence

intensifies. Member states operate within an economic and discursive reality shaped by Beijing, rendering China's development path a default standard rather than a strategic mandate.

The discursive side of this hegemonic shift is visible in formal BRICS summit statements. Analyzing BRICS communiqués from 2009 to 2024 reveals a steady linguistic shift toward concepts championed by China. Use of "multipolarity" rose from roughly 8% of mentions between 2009 and 2015 to 32% between 2015 and 2024. Simultaneously, "South-South cooperation" increased from 18% to 48%. Furthermore, UN General Assembly records show BRICS members aligned with Chinese positions 68% to 82% of the time from 2015 to 2024. The peak agreement was between China and Russia at 82%. Van Noort (2019) argues that crafting strategic narratives in multilateral forums is a tool of power. By reshaping the vocabulary used for collective issues and fixes, dominant actors can frame their specific interests as group-wide goals. This narrative alignment represents more than diplomatic unity; it is an ideological process through which China's preferred global order principles become institutionalized in BRICS rhetoric. Still, not every member fully adopts this ideological consensus. Some attempt to maintain strategic autonomy, highlighting the underlying tensions within BRICS solidarity.

This hegemonic consensus is not, however, completely stable. Various member states have worked to keep degrees of strategic independence, exposing the frictions that exist beneath the surface of BRICS unity. India holds the most consistently autonomous stance: though its general UN voting alignment with China is about 68%, on sensitive matters like territorial claims and the South China Sea, this drops to roughly 35–40%. India also takes a selective approach to the BRI, taking significant NDB funding (USD 18.9 billion) while opting out of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Brazil, meanwhile, engages in intentional trade diversification, keeping major economic ties with the European Union (22% of trade) and the United States (20%), alongside China (28%), to guard against dependence on one partner (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). These tactics illustrate what Brüttsch and Papa (2013) identify as the heterogeneity of interests inside BRICS.

However, the capacity for resistance remains constrained by structural factors, as demonstrated most clearly by South Africa and Brazil within the BRICS grouping. South Africa, possessing the coalition's most fragile economy, maintains the highest external debt ratio to China (16.9% of total external debt), experienced a meager 1.2% average annual GDP growth from 2015 to 2024, and remains highly vulnerable to country risk shocks that escalate borrowing costs and restrict fiscal flexibility (Muzindutsi & Obalade, 2020). This configuration renders South Africa's bargaining power with China structurally deficient: the price of challenging China-aligned financial terms is excessively high relative to the limited alternatives currently available. Brazil serves as a distinct yet equally instructive example. Brazil remains deeply reliant on Chinese development capital to address its massive infrastructure deficit, despite actively broadening its trade portfolio by maintaining 22% of trade with the EU, 20% with the US, and 28% with China. The expanding trade deficit between Brazil and China, rising from USD 14.1 billion in 2015 to USD 36.8 billion in 2024, reflects an asymmetric economic bond that Brazil's hedging strategies have failed to rectify (George & Shanmugam, 2022). Hooijmaaijers (2021) argues that the barriers to reforming global economic governance via BRICS are not primarily driven by political intent. Rather, they stem from structural

positioning, specifically how China’s robust material standing within the bloc continues to intensify.

This scenario illustrates Gramsci's theory regarding the active participation of subordinate actors within established systems of dominance: acquiescence arises not from ignorance but from the realization that choices are limited and the penalties for withdrawal are significant. The result is a self-perpetuating mode of hegemony, where ideological agreement validates institutional structures, institutional structures sustain material reliance, and material reliance limits the capacity for proposing viable ideological alternatives. As the subsequent section demonstrates, the material foundation of China’s economic supremacy within BRICS has not merely persisted since the bloc's inception, but has significantly expanded, further complicating efforts to shift the hegemonic narrative.

### China's Economic Power as the Basis for Hegemony

The ideological leadership and institutional frameworks examined in the previous segments do not operate in isolation; instead, they are grounded in and constantly bolstered by China's dominant economic status within the BRICS. According to Gramscian theory, hegemony requires a physical basis; the power to lead ideologically is fundamentally connected to the ability to shape the structural factors that dictate the choices of other participants (Munir & Abid, 2024). China's economic position within the BRICS provides exactly this groundwork. China accounted for roughly 38% of BRICS GDP in 2009. This proportion had increased to approximately 54.8% in nominal figures and 52.0% in purchasing power parity by 2024. This demonstrates not just China's total expansion but also its increasing significance relative to other partners in the group (IMF World Economic Outlook, 2024). Table 5 presents the complete view of how China's material status compares with the rest of the BRICS nations.

**Tabel 5. China’s Material Economic Platform in BRICS**

Indicators	China	India	Brazil	Russia	Afrika Selatan
<b>GDP (nominal, %)</b>	54,8%	12%	6,3%	5,6%	1,3%
<b>Trade Deficit with China (2024, USD Billion)</b>	-	+67,9	+36,8	-71,3*	+11,2
<b>External Debt to China (% of Total)</b>	-	8,5%	10%	8%	16,9%
<b>NDB Funding Received (USD Billion, %)</b>	21,3 (31,6%)	18,9 (28%)	15,8% (23,4%)	8,2 (12,2%)	3,3 (4,9%)
<b>Bilateral Trade with China (2024, USD Bilion)</b>	-	142,7	~130	196,3	~45

*Source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2024; National Bureau of Statistics China 2024; World Bank External Debt Database 2024; NDB Annual Report 2024 \*Russia's negative figure reflects a surplus in China's favor driven by energy exports; the deficit figure denotes Russia's trade imbalance in manufactured goods imports.*

The concentration of financial strength provides BRICS with structural influence over policy-making, even if official voting protocols suggest total equality. When China proposes

initiatives during NDB sessions or BRICS summits, member nations have underlying incentives to support them rather than resist. Dissenting against Chinese suggestions risks damaging ties with the group's primary financier and most significant export destination. Hooijmaaijers (2021) argues that China's massive economic scale within BRICS creates a gravitational force for its policy choices that formal institutional regulations cannot entirely account for. This trend aligns with Gramscian hegemony, where the leading power's interests become structurally difficult to challenge, not because of bans on dissent, but because the economic penalties of such resistance are too heavy for most smaller participants (Munir & Abid, 2024).

Commercial ties between China and fellow BRICS members demonstrate a steady structural imbalance that worsens financial reliance as time passes. Sino-Indian trade rose from \$71.2 billion in 2015 to \$142.7 billion in 2024. Nevertheless, the nature of traded commodities reveals a discrepancy: India primarily ships raw resources and farm products, while purchasing industrial goods, equipment, and hardware from China. The China-Brazil connection follows a comparable path, as Brazil's trade gap widened from USD 14.1 billion in 2015 to USD 36.8 billion in 2024. Brazilian shipments consist mainly of crops and fuel, whereas Chinese exports are predominantly high-value processed items (UNCTAD, 2023). This raw-material-for-finished-goods swap reflects the terms-of-trade models that dependency scholars usually associate with center-periphery structures, raising questions about whether BRICS South-South collaboration represents a genuine shift from old trends or simply a reshuffling under different authority (Bond, 2018).

Both Russia and South Africa represent distinct but equally revealing cases of structural reliance. By 2024, Russia's commerce with China reached \$196.3 billion, a massive rise from \$84.4 billion in 2015. This surge resulted largely from post-2022 Western sanctions, which positioned China as the primary destination for Russian energy. While Russia maintains an energy trade surplus, it faces a \$71.3 billion deficit in imported manufactured products from China. This highlights economic vulnerability, as Russia depends on a single partner for both industrial supplies and export income (NDB Annual Report, 2024). Meanwhile, as the smallest BRICS economy, South Africa exhibits the deepest dependence on China. Its Chinese external debt accounts for 16.9% of its total foreign debt, the highest proportion within the bloc. With a meager annual GDP growth of 1.2% between 2015 and 2024, South Africa lacks the leverage to challenge or negotiate China's preferred terms in BRICS, unlike larger nations like Brazil or India (Muzindutsi & Obalade, 2020).

The material supremacy of China is further solidified by its dual role as a multilateral creditor via the NDB and a bilateral lender through state-owned entities such as the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China. Beijing's financial influence over BRICS nations operates simultaneously through two distinct pathways. The multilateral route provides institutional credibility and procedural masking, whereas the bilateral route facilitates direct creditor-to-debtor engagement, establishing specific debt dependencies that exist outside the NDB's scope (Chin, 2014). Examining these combined channels reveals that China's aggregate financial presence within BRICS far exceeds what is reflected in NDB statistics. For members facing restricted fiscal capacity, notably South Africa and, during specific macroeconomic shifts, Brazil, the accumulation of multilateral and bilateral debt toward China

restricts policy flexibility by threatening immediate financial repercussions (George & Shanmugam, 2022).

This research highlights China's GDP superiority, trade imbalances, and dual-creditor status as the material pillars of hegemony within BRICS. Within a Gramscian framework, this economic base is not merely a backdrop for ideological or institutional shifts; it is the primary enabler. The ideological discourses explored in the first part of this chapter, and the institutional structures detailed later, gain efficacy because they are rooted in and bolstered by China's structural economic standing. An actor holding 54.8% of the bloc's GDP, serving as the primary trade partner for all members, and functioning as both a multilateral and bilateral lender needs no overt force to sway results; the systemic structure itself generates the incentives that ensure cooperation (Munir & Abid, 2024; Hooijmaaijers, 2021). This phenomenon is termed "veiled hegemony" by this study: a situation where a single power leads under the guise of mutual gain, while economic constraints make participation effectively mandatory.

### Implications for Developing Countries and Global Governance

For participating developing nations, the BRICS-BRI alignment offers a mix of potential gains and systemic hurdles. Funding for infrastructure via the New Development Bank (NDB) may assist in narrowing developmental voids. Transit initiatives reduce logistical expenses and unlock market entry for local firms, power schemes help tackle infrastructure shortages that impede financial expansion, while telecom progress encourages digital connectivity. Nevertheless, these advantages frequently come with structural reliances that might restrict a host nation's sovereign decision-making. Additionally, adopting Chinese-defined technical benchmarks in BRI schemes carries the risk of establishing technological subordination. Moreover, domestic workforces are commonly relegated to low-paying roles, while leadership posts are occupied by Chinese staff. This interaction mirrors the dependency theory in development research, a systemic state where a secondary nation's economic growth is restricted by its ties to a leading economy.

**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)

*Source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2024; National Bureau of Statistics China 2024; World Bank External Debt Database 2024*

Essentially, the convergence of BRICS and the BRI highlights China's drive to bolster its authority within global governance. This approach functions via two primary channels: ideological guidance fostering a narrative of multilateralism and Global South cooperation, and institutional management through the NDB. At first, this seems to provide developing nations more room in the international system by offering infrastructure funding, accelerated project approvals, and more flexible governance standards than Western counterparts. Yet, these openings mask the potential for a fresh type of hegemony. While Western bodies utilize overt conditionality, Chinese influence works through subtle channels, termed veiled hegemony—including investment reliance, market entry, debt reorganization, and soft power via Confucius Institutes, academic exchanges, and research partnerships that build a China-centric development model. Nevertheless, China's supremacy in BRICS encounters various hurdles, such as India, which continues its hedging policy and stays autonomous on several strategic fronts while joining the BRI only selectively, whereas Brazil, Russia, and South Africa similarly display patterns of pushback or interest diversification.

## CONCLUSION

This Research reveals three critical findings that collectively demonstrate how China exerts hidden the hegemony within the BRICS using the combination of economic dominance and ideological leadership that leads member states to accept the order as normal and even beneficial for them.

First, China positioning themselves as the defender of developing countries's interest through narratives of multipolarity and solidarity with the Global South, while they're strengthening its influence by doing soft power mechanisms such as Confucius Institutes, Educational Exchanges, and cultural diplomacy. The mentions of "multipolarity in the BRICS" communiques are increasing from 8% to 32% and also voting alignment at the UN is reaching an average of 68-82%. It reflects the success of this narrative framing strategy.

Second, China institutionalized its interest through the new development bank, an institutional instrument directing their resources towards BRI infrastructures while maintaining a multilateral facade. Approximately 54% of the NDB's portfolio is linked to BRI objectives, with the transportation programs receiving 28% of funding and also highest BRI alignment at 72%. A faster approval process compared to the world bank also provides procedural advantages for projects that aligned with China's interest.

Third, China's economic dominance, accounting for 52-54.8% of BRICS total GDP, provides the material foundation for supporting both mechanisms. Sustained trade imbalances, external debt exposure (South Africa that has 16,9% of the total nation debt is owed to the China), and the risk of infrastructure debt conversion, as in the case of the Hambantota port, creating structural incentives that makes member states more likely to accept China's preferences.

These three findings together creating a situation where China's preferences shows as shared interests, institutional mechanism directing resources accordingly, and the economic interdependence makes the dominance seem unavoidable and that also has been stated in Gramsci's book where he said that Hegemony operates through consensus not coercion. The implication of this dynamic are significant for global governance. Rather than creating a truly multipolar system, the BRICS and BRI synergy has the potential to rising a new form of

Chinese-led hegemony that operates through investment dependence, market access, debt restructuring, and cultural influence.

Going forward, further research needs to assess whether consensus of BRICS will further consolidate around China's preferences or become fragmented due to the increasing heterogeneity of interests among its country members.

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