



A Bridge Builder and a Voice of the Global South or a Risky Alignment? Role Conceptions of Indonesia's BRICS Membership

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Abstract

President Prabowo's decision to pursue full membership in BRICS marks a strategic departure from the cautious stance of former President Joko Widodo, who in 2023 hesitated over concerns that such a move might compromise Indonesia's Free and Active foreign policy. This paper explores why Indonesia, a country that traditionally committed to non-alignment and ASEAN centrality, became a member in a forum often perceived as a counterbalance to the Western-led international order. This raises a question: what motivated Indonesia to formally enter the BRICS grouping? Employing Role Theory, the paper argues that Indonesia's bid reflects a strategic effort to assert its role as an independent "Bridge Builder" and "Voice for the Global South." It further argues that ambition is complicated by inherent role conflicts that strain Indonesia's leadership within ASEAN and its relationship with Western partners. The study employs qualitative content analysis of primary sources, including presidential speeches and media discourse. The findings reveal that Indonesia's push for BRICS membership is a calculated move to enhance its global role. However, it highlights a fundamental tension in which Indonesia's roles as a bridge builder and a member of the Global South risk becoming unsustainable if perceived as favouring one side. Ultimately, Indonesia's potential entry into BRICS is a test of its ability to navigate competing roles within a polarised international system, underscoring the relevance of role theory in understanding emerging middle powers in multilateralism.

Keywords *Indonesia, BRICS, Roles*

INTRODUCTION

BRICS (an acronym denoting its core members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is a loosely structured coalition of major emerging economies that seeks to amplify the collective influence of its members in the global economy and politics. Today, the grouping represents a notable shift in contemporary global economic and political dynamics, as it also strives to challenge the prevailing dominance of Western-centric institutions (Ferragamo, 2025; Gabuev & Stuenkel, 2024; Stuenkel, 2024). As the BRICS is increasingly perceived as a viable alternative to Western-dominated institutions, its popularity has grown among countries in the Global South, which are seeking more balanced and inclusive frameworks for international cooperation.

Indonesia formally joined BRICS on January 6, 2025, following a sudden policy shift by President Prabowo Subianto, who submitted the membership application during the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024. This marked a departure from former President Joko Widodo's cautious stance in 2023, when he declined full membership over concerns that alignment with Russia might contradict Indonesia's "free and active" foreign policy (Azis, 2024; He, 2023; Rüland, 2023). The rapid shift in policy is both significant and complex, warranting closer analysis.

Foreign Minister Sugiono described the move as consistent with Indonesia's commitment to balanced, independent diplomacy and framed BRICS membership as a platform to advance

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Global South interests ([Reuters, 2024](#); [Sugiono, 2024](#)). President Prabowo has repeatedly voiced Indonesia's ambition to lead within the Global South, including during the January 2024 presidential debate ([Antaranews.com, 2024](#)). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs further portrays Indonesia as a "bridge builder" amid global uncertainty, reinforcing its role conception as a constructive multilateral actor and highlighting the strategic symbolism of its BRICS engagement ([Antaranews.com, 2025](#)). This narrative reinforces Indonesia's role-conception as a constructive actor in multilateral diplomacy, while also revealing the strategic symbolism embedded in its BRICS engagement

Indonesia's decision to join BRICS has triggered a polarized debate among scholars and policymakers. Critics argue the economic rationale is overstated, noting that Indonesia already benefits from platforms like the G20 and RCEP—particularly in its ties with China—without the geopolitical implications of BRICS membership ([Gozali & Pashya, 2024](#); [Shofa, 2023](#)). Economist Yose Rizal Damuri notes that Indonesia's economic performance surpasses that of several BRICS members, while intra-BRICS trade remains heavily concentrated on China, thereby limiting practical gains. Geopolitically, skeptics warn that BRICS membership may signal alignment with revisionist powers, potentially straining ties with the United States and the European Union and undermining Indonesia's free and active foreign policy, as well as its leadership within ASEAN ([BBC, 2025](#); [Duggan et al., 2022](#)).

Supporters, however, view the move as a strategic effort to elevate Indonesia's global profile and reclaim its leadership within the Global South. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents the decision as a commitment to inclusive development, multilateral cooperation, and reduced reliance on traditional powers ([Iannone, 2025](#); [Ghifari, 2023](#)). Advocates highlight access to alternative financial systems, infrastructure investment, and diversified partnerships as key national benefits.

This paper probes the strategic motivations behind Indonesia's decision to join BRICS, questioning why Indonesia—a country long committed to non-alignment and ASEAN centrality—seeks membership in a forum often perceived as a counterweight to the Western-led international order. It argues that while Indonesia's initiative reflects its strategic aspiration to elevate its role as a bridge builder and a leading voice of the Global South onto a more influential global platform, this ambition simultaneously exposes the country to role conflict—particularly if its engagement with BRICS undermines its credibility within ASEAN or signals a drift from democratic partnerships in the West. By examining Indonesia's role conceptions, external expectations, and domestic contestations, the objective is to assess whether Indonesia's BRICS engagement represents a coherent extension of its free and active foreign policy, or whether it signals a deeper recalibration of its international identity amid shifting global alignments. In doing so, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the performative dimensions of Indonesia's foreign policy in an era of contested multilateralism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early scholarly assessments of BRICS were cautiously optimistic, viewing the grouping as a potential economic bloc capable of reshaping global power dynamics. However, [Pant \(2013\)](#) argues that BRICS has struggled to convert its economic promise into coherent political influence. Internal divisions, structural asymmetries, and China's dominant role have hindered unity, rendering BRICS more symbolic than substantive.

More recent scholarship has shifted toward the normative aspirations of the BRICS. [Stuenkel \(2020\)](#) contends that BRICS does not aim to overturn the global order but to promote a rules-based multipolar system, encouraging Western powers to adhere more consistently to international norms. Similarly, [Monyae and Ndzendze \(2021\)](#) describe BRICS as a flexible

multilateral entity rather than a formal alliance, advocating pluralism and inclusivity in global governance. Despite internal challenges and strategic rivalries, BRICS has demonstrated institutional innovation. [Roberts et al. \(2018\)](#) highlight its “financial statecraft,” including the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), as evidence of its commitment to alternative financial mechanisms. While lacking a unified vision, BRICS members share a common stance against Western hegemony.

Studies also emphasize BRICS’ potential to strengthen South–South cooperation. [Duggan et al. \(2022\)](#) note shared commitments to sovereignty and development, though strategic tensions—especially among China, India, and Russia—persist. Nonetheless, BRICS remains a key platform for advancing the interests of developing nations. Rather than opposing the West outright, BRICS seeks to counterbalance Western dominance and promote a more inclusive global governance framework. Despite BRICS’ growing relevance, most scholarship focuses on its original five members. The implications of expansion—particularly the inclusion of states like Indonesia—remain underexplored. As BRICS evolves, understanding the roles and strategic orientations of new members is essential to assessing its future trajectory.

This study applies Role Theory to examine Indonesia’s motivations for joining BRICS. Rooted in sociology and adapted to international relations by scholars such as [Holsti \(1970\)](#), [Walker et al. \(2016\)](#), [Thies \(2017\)](#), and [Harnisch et al. \(2011\)](#), Role Theory provides a framework for understanding how states define and enact their roles in the international system. It focuses on three dimensions: national role conception, role expectations, and role performance. National Role Conception refers to policymakers’ internalized understandings of their state’s functions in global affairs. These conceptions are shaped by domestic priorities, historical narratives, and external pressures. In Indonesia’s case, [Borchers \(2013\)](#) identifies roles such as regional leader, global actor, non-aligned state, mediator, and normative model. [Rüland \(2017\)](#) traces the evolution of these roles, noting the emergence of a democratic identity post-1998 and the centrality of democracy promotion in Indonesia’s soft power strategy.

[Karim \(2018, 2021, 2023a, 2023b\)](#) explores Indonesia’s ambition to be seen as a middle power, framing it as “a regional power with global interests.” He identifies four dominant roles: the voice of the Global South, regional leader, promoter of democratic norms, and bridge builder. However, tensions exist—particularly when Indonesia’s global advocacy for human rights clashes with its regional diplomacy, such as its stance on Myanmar. Role Expectations involve the norms and assumptions held by domestic and international actors about how a state should behave. Material capabilities, ideational influence, and status shape these expectations. [Thies and Sari \(2018\)](#) describe roles as socially recognized positions within an organized group, requiring states to align internal conceptions with external demands—a process known as role location. [Agastia \(2020\)](#) interprets Indonesia’s 2018 Indo-Pacific Outlook as an effort to locate itself within the regional architecture, reinforcing its identity as a stabilizing and normative actor.

Finally, Role Performance refers to the actual diplomatic actions and behaviours through which a state enacts its role. In the BRICS context, Indonesia’s foreign policy discourse, initiatives, and institutional engagement will reveal how it reconciles its middle power identity with the expectations of BRICS members and the broader international community. [Thies and Sari \(2018\)](#) argue that Indonesia’s middle power status is reflected in its roles as a responsible international citizen, a multilateralist, and a defender of the existing order—embodied in its peacekeeping efforts and “free and active” foreign policy tradition.

While existing studies have applied Role Theory to Indonesia’s position within ASEAN, this research extends the framework to analyse Indonesia’s socialisation and role development within BRICS. It addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring how Indonesia navigates overlapping and potentially conflicting roles as it integrates into a more inclusive, yet complex, global platform.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the complex motivations and contradictions behind Indonesia's pursuit of BRICS membership. The methodology is structured as a single-case study of Indonesia's foreign policy decision-making, which allows for a holistic and contextualized examination of this contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.

The research relies on a systematic qualitative content analysis of key texts, with data gathered from three primary sources to ensure validity. First, official government documents and speeches by the President and Foreign Minister are analysed to identify Indonesia's core role conceptions, such as "bridge builder" or "voice of the Global South." Second, domestic media reports and expert commentary from Indonesian think tanks are examined to uncover the domestic contestation and debate surrounding the BRICS bid. Third, international statements from BRICS members and traditional partners are reviewed to map the external role expectations placed upon Indonesia.

The data analysis follows a directed approach, using the core concepts of Role Theory as an initial framework while remaining open to emergent themes. The process involves three integrated stages: first, deciphering Indonesian discourse to establish a hierarchy of its self-defined roles; second, exploring international discourse to understand the pressures and anticipations of other states; and third, an integrative analysis to pinpoint the tensions and synergies between Indonesia's role conceptions and the external expectations, thereby revealing the dynamics of role conflict and role location. This methodology, however, has several limitations as it relies on public discourse, which may not capture the full spectrum of private governmental deliberations. It, therefore, employs analytical cross-checks across its multiple data sources to ensure the research process is rigorous and replicable. Through this method, the study aims to provide a nuanced, theory-driven explanation of Indonesia's foreign policy behaviour.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Strategic Importance of BRICS

Established in 2009, BRICS began as a forum for cooperation among emerging economies and has since evolved into a significant geopolitical and economic force. Its mission includes fostering collaboration across economic, political, and cultural domains, while amplifying the voice of developing countries in global governance reform ([Gabuev & Stuenkel, 2024](#)). The 2024 expansion—adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—marked a strategic effort to strengthen Global South representation. Indonesia's accession in 2025 further diversified the bloc, introducing Southeast Asia into its strategic calculus. With 11 member states and eight recognized partner countries, BRICS now reflects a broader coalition of emerging powers. As President Xi Jinping noted, this expansion enhances BRICS' vitality, representativeness, and influence.

Economically, BRICS members and partners account for 41.41% of global GDP (PPP), surpassing the G7's 29.08%, with China and India contributing 19.05% and 8.23%, respectively ([Norton, 2025](#); [IMF, 2025](#)). The bloc's population exceeds 3.3 billion—over 40% of the global total ([Feingold, 2024](#)). Politically, the BRICS challenge Western-led institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, exemplified by the creation of the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement ([Stuenkel, 2020](#)). Its scope now spans finance, trade, health, education, technology, and more, through working groups and ministerial dialogues. Today, the BRICS+ initiative reflects a push to redefine global norms and elevate non-Western perspectives. However, its long-term impact depends on reconciling internal diversity and maintaining coherence in global negotiations ([Jash, 2025](#)).

Indonesia's Role in BRICS: Bridge Builder and Global South Leader

Indonesia has officially framed its BRICS membership as a strategic extension of its long-standing foreign policy identity, namely, its aspiration to serve as a "Bridge Builder" and a leading "Voice of the Global South." By joining BRICS, Indonesia claims to strengthen its capacity to mediate between diverse global actors while amplifying the concerns and interests of developing nations on a more influential platform. This narrative aligns with Indonesia's historical positioning as a non-aligned actor committed to inclusive multilateralism and equitable global governance. However, these dual role aspirations—bridging geopolitical divides and representing the Global South—are not without tension. The following sections examine how Indonesia envisions and performs these roles and explore the potential contradictions that may arise as it navigates its relationships with ASEAN, Western democratic partners, and fellow BRICS members.

Indonesia's Role as Build-Builder

While often analysed through a purely economic or geopolitical lens, Indonesia's membership in BRICS is fundamentally an ambitious project of role location, representing a strategic gambit to enact its long-cherished self-conception as a "Bridge Builder" on a more powerful, global stage. However, the feasibility of this role within the complex and often divided BRICS consortium is fraught with challenges, testing the very identity Indonesia seeks to project.

The concept of the "Bridge Builder" is deeply embedded in the DNA of modern Indonesian foreign policy. It is a direct evolution of the foundational free and active doctrine, which mandates independence from power blocs and an active role in fostering international cooperation. The nation's leadership has consistently articulated this role conception. As Foreign Minister Sugiono has stated, "As a BRICS member, Indonesia wants to become a bridge-builder for the interests of developing economies and the Indo-Pacific nations. We will continue to remain active in preventing further escalations to geo-economic and geopolitical rivalry," ([Gokmen & Khaliq, 2025](#)). Sugiono's remark was in line with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement when Prabowo attended his first official BRICS meeting, "President Prabowo, attending for the first time, will use this opportunity to voice Indonesia's position as a bridge-builder on various global issues and collective efforts amid growing global uncertainties," ([Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, n.d.](#)) This role is in line with Prabowo's new mantra in foreign policy, as he remarked, 'I have repeatedly stated that Indonesia will carry out foreign policy as a country that wishes to be a good neighbor, we want to be the good neighbor. We want to follow the ancient philosophy, "A thousand friends are too few, one enemy is too many.Thus, we want to be friends with all countries' ([Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary, 2024](#)).

Based on the above statements, Prabowo's administration has explicitly framed the BRICS bid as an extension of this historic "bridge builder" role. They contend that Indonesia's membership would not signify a pivot away from the West but would enhance its capacity to serve as a stabilizing and mediating force within the BRICS consortium itself. This aligns with the pragmatic belief that Indonesia can maintain robust relationships with Western powers such as the United States and the European Union while engaging deeply with non-Western groupings. This is not seen as a contradiction but as the practical application of its "free and active" doctrine. As noted by a researcher from CSIS Indonesia, the country has no intention of distancing itself from the West, either gradually or abruptly. Indonesia's foreign policy ethos emphasizes universal friendship and seeks to broaden its international engagement ([Rahn, 2025](#)).

To advance this vision, Prabowo has emphasised the importance of broad-based diplomatic engagement, describing his approach as one of "friendship with all countries" as he remarked 'I have repeatedly stated that Indonesia will carry out foreign policy as a country that wishes to be a

good neighbor, we want to be the good neighbor. We want to follow the ancient philosophy, “A thousand friends are too few, one enemy is too many.Thus, we want to be friends with all countries’ (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary, 2024). An Indonesian scholar, Fitriani (2025), argues that this strategy aligns with Indonesia’s established tradition of multi-alignment, rather than marking a departure from it.

Moreover, its position as a middle power within the grouping enhances its strategic influence in global affairs through a strategy of ‘diversified institutional landscape to hedge against post-unipolar uncertainty’ (Lee et al., 2025), by cultivating cooperative ties between BRICS and with fellow Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia can reinforce the region’s collective non-aligned stance amid growing geopolitical uncertainty. This approach not only affirms Indonesia’s leadership role within ASEAN but also strengthens its reputation as a committed multilateral actor, particularly as global powers like the United States increasingly adopt unilateral policies. This is evident in Indonesia’s commitment to pursuing OECD membership, with President Prabowo Subianto setting a target of full accession within three years. Simultaneously, Indonesia is deepening its engagement with the Quad, of which India, a founding member of BRICS, is a part. A recent joint statement by Prabowo and Prime Minister Modi highlighted the Australia–India–Indonesia Trilateral as a reflection of Indonesia’s growing involvement in Indo-Pacific mini-lateral frameworks and its broader strategic outreach (Fraser & Saha, 2025). Thus, Prabowo’s administration claimed that through BRICS membership, Indonesia’s diplomatic strategy is one of proactive role location, aiming to perform its bridging function not merely as a passive observer, but as an active architect of dialogue within the complex theatre of a multipolar world.

Indonesia as a Voice of the Global South

Indonesia’s accession to BRICS has been officially framed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a reflection of the country’s increasingly assertive engagement in global affairs, reflecting Prabowo’s ambition to elevate Indonesia “beyond its ... role as Southeast Asia’s natural leader.” (Shibata, 2025). President Prabowo Subianto has articulated a vision to uplift Indonesia’s international stature beyond its traditional role as a regional leader in Southeast Asia, positioning it instead as a connector between developed and developing nations. Central to this ambition is Indonesia’s advocacy for a more equitable global governance system, one that better represents the interests of the Global South. While the path is fraught with complexity, Indonesia’s pursuit of BRICS is a clear signal of its intent to move from a regional leader to a central architect in the recalibration of global power, determined to ensure that the voices of the developing world are heard and heeded.

Indonesia’s potential to assume a leadership role within the Global South through its BRICS membership is multifaceted. Several factors contribute to this potential, rooted in Indonesia’s historical, geopolitical, and economic standing. Indonesia’s claim to Global South leadership is deeply rooted in the 1955 Bandung Conference. It laid the foundation for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which championed principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence, providing a platform for developing countries to voice their interests outside the influence of the Cold War superpowers. As Jorge Heine, a former Chilean Ambassador to China, argued, the historical legacy provides Indonesia with a unique credibility and moral authority within the Global South (Heine, 2025).

Indonesia’s role conception was also hailed as reinforcing the group’s claim of representing the Global South. As the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs echoed this sentiment upon announcing Indonesia’s acceptance into BRICS:

“Indonesia shares with the other members of the group the support for the reform of global

governance institutions and contributes positively to the deepening of cooperation in the Global South—priority themes for the Brazilian presidency of BRICS, whose motto is Strengthening Cooperation in the Global South for a more Inclusive and Sustainable Governance” ([Brazilian Government, 2025](#))

Indonesia’s entry into BRICS marks a significant turning point for both the nation and the coalition. For Indonesia, it signals a strategic move to reinforce its identity as an emerging middle power with growing influence in global governance. For BRICS, the addition of Indonesia boosts its credibility and reinforces its position as a representative platform for the Global South.

Potential Role Conflict?

The evidence from presidential rhetoric, ministerial statements, and expert analysis presents a coherent picture that Indonesia's bid for BRICS membership is profoundly motivated by its self-conceived role as a "bridge builder" and the "voice of the global South." However, conducting such roles is not without challenges. First, considering that BRICS is an organization that is often touted as a counterweight to the dominance of Western countries in the world, while there are less harmonious relations between BRICS members (Russia, China, and Iran) and Western countries, Indonesia's membership has the potential to complicate its relations with the United States and the European Union ([Duggan et al., 2022](#); [Stuenkel, 2024](#)).

If tensions between the BRICS and the West escalate, Indonesia must carefully manage its role to avoid harming its broader foreign policy objectives. Moreover, the grouping is far from a monolithic entity; it is an arena of intense internal competition, most notably the strategic rivalry between China and India. For Indonesia to build a bridge between these two giants within the BRICS context is a Herculean task. China’s increasing dominance and its vision for a more politically assertive BRICS that challenges US hegemony directly clash with India’s more cautious approach and its strong strategic ties with the West ([Ferragamo, 2025](#); [Tran, 2023](#)). Consequently, Indonesia’s attempt to mediate would require a diplomatic finesse that may be beyond the capacity of any single member, potentially leaving it marginalized or forced to choose sides—a direct contradiction of its bridging ethos.

Second, the "bridge builder" role conflicts sharply with Indonesia’s other cornerstone identity as the leader of ASEAN. ASEAN centrality relies on maintaining a neutral and balanced regional environment where no single external power dominates. Joining a group perceived by many as a Sino-centric project risks undermining this delicate balance. Moreover, Indonesia's involvement with the BRICS raises concerns about its leadership role in ASEAN because it risks dividing its diplomatic resources among various international commitments. While BRICS membership may increase Indonesia's global influence, it also has the potential to divert resources away from regional commitments. This concern, for example, can be seen from the absence of Foreign Minister Sugiono at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in December 2024 because he accompanied President Prabowo at the D-8 Summit in Cairo ([The Jakarta Post, 2024](#)). One observer, for example, criticized, 'In his haste to portray himself as a global leader, Prabowo seems to be abdicating from Indonesia's regional leadership' ([Sulaiman, 2025](#)).

Indonesia finds itself in a paradoxical position. On one hand, its decision to join BRICS reflects an ambition to serve as a global bridge builder and a leading voice of the Global South. On the other hand, this could exacerbate internal tensions within BRICS—particularly the China-India rivalry—and undermine Indonesia’s longstanding leadership role within ASEAN. The challenge lies not in securing membership, but in managing the competing expectations that follow. Indonesia must reconcile its global aspirations with regional commitments, lest the very bridges it seeks to build begin to fracture under the weight of conflicting roles.

CONCLUSIONS

Indonesia's entry into BRICS signals Jakarta's intent to play a more assertive role in shaping multipolar cooperation, mediating ideological divides, and championing the interests of the Global South. Indonesia's membership in BRICS is more than symbolic; it is a strategic assertion of its identity as a bridge builder and advocate for the Global South. Through its diplomatic agility, historical legitimacy, and institutional engagement, Indonesia contributes to reshaping global governance in ways that transcend traditional power blocs. As BRICS evolves into a broader platform for multipolar cooperation, Indonesia's role will be pivotal in ensuring that the voices of developing nations are taken seriously.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Building on the findings of the current study, future research could explore how Indonesian policymakers seek to expand the scope of the country's middle power playing field by adopting additional roles, 'bridge-builder and balancer' and 'the global south advocator' in BRICS, and how these roles are strategically employed to enhance Indonesia's visibility and recognition as a middle power by other international actors.

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