



China's leadership in BRICS+: driving change in the Global South

El liderazgo de China en los BRICS+: impulsando el cambio en el Sur Global

A liderança da China no BRICS+: impulsionar a mudança no Sul Global

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Enviado em: 26 de setembro de 2024

Aceito em: 19 de março de 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines China's consolidation of leadership within BRICS+, highlighting its historical evolution and key strategies that have enabled it to assume a leading role. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is analyzed as a crucial example of China's projection of economic and political power, significantly strengthening its influence in the Global South. Through a literature review, the article explores the internal dynamics of BRICS+ and how the Asian country has effectively aligned its interests with those of other member states, promoting economic cooperation and sustainable development through institutions such as the New Development Bank (NDB). The analysis of Chinese leadership not only addresses criticisms of potential economic neocolonialism but also emphasizes its role in seeking a new world order that is more favorable for emerging economies. By advancing multilateralism and greater equity in global governance, China's leadership within BRICS+ represents both a significant challenge and an opportunity for the existing international system.

KEYWORDS: China; BRICS+; Leadership; Belt and Road Initiative; Global South

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la consolidación del liderazgo de China dentro de los BRICS+, destacando su evolución histórica y las estrategias clave que le han permitido asumir un papel de liderazgo. La Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta (BRI, por sus siglas en inglés) es analizada como un ejemplo crucial de la proyección de poder económico y político de China, fortaleciendo significativamente su influencia en el Sur Global. A través de una revisión de la literatura, el artículo explora la dinámica interna de los BRICS+ y cómo el país asiático ha armonizado con eficacia sus intereses con los de otros estados miembros, promoviendo la cooperación económica y el desarrollo sostenible a través de instituciones como el Nuevo Banco de Desarrollo (NDB). El análisis del liderazgo chino no solo

aborda las críticas a un posible neocolonialismo económico, sino que también enfatiza su papel en la búsqueda de un nuevo orden mundial que sea más favorable para las economías emergentes. Al promover el multilateralismo y una mayor equidad en la gobernanza global, el liderazgo de China dentro de los BRICS+ representa tanto un desafío significativo como una oportunidad para el sistema internacional actual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: China; BRICS+; Liderazgo; Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta; Sur Global

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a consolidação da liderança da China no seio dos BRICS+, destacando a sua evolução histórica e as principais estratégias que lhe permitem assumir um papel de liderança. A Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota (BRI) é analisada como um exemplo crucial da projeção do poder económico e político da China, reforçando significativamente a sua influência no Sul Global. Através de uma revisão da literatura, o artigo explora as dinâmicas internas do BRICS+ e a forma como o país asiático tem alinhado eficazmente os seus interesses com os dos restantes Estados membros, promovendo a cooperação económica e o desenvolvimento sustentável através de instituições como o Novo Banco de Desenvolvimento (NDB). A análise da liderança chinesa não só aborda as críticas de um potencial neocolonialismo económico, como também enfatiza o seu papel na procura de uma nova ordem mundial mais favorável às economias emergentes. Ao promover o multilateralismo e uma maior equidade na governação global, a liderança da China nos BRICS+ representa um desafio significativo e uma oportunidade para o atual sistema internacional.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: China; BRICS+; Liderança; Iniciativa do Cinturão e Rota; Sul Global

1 INTRODUCTION

China's leadership in the BRICS+³ has been the subject of numerous academic studies and political analyses. Previous research has highlighted China's ability to use its economic and diplomatic influence to consolidate its position within the group and promote a cooperation and development agenda (Breslin, 2013). However, criticism has also been raised about the implications of this leadership, suggesting that it may represent a new form of economic colonialism (Antiwi-Boateng, 2017). This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by providing a detailed and up-to-date analysis of the evolution of Chinese leadership in the BRICS+ and its impact on the Global South.

The creation of the BRICS+ has represented a significant shift in the global order, providing a platform for cooperation among emerging economies seeking to counter the hegemony of developed economies (Cooper, 2017). Since its inception, China has played a crucial role in the formation and consolidation of this group, leveraging its economic growth and political influence to establish itself as a leader within the bloc. Various studies have explored how China has used its economic power and investment capacity to strengthen its position, highlighting the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a key tool in its expansion strategy (Lipsky, 2017).

3. The BRICS+ is an expansion of the original BRICS group, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This expansion involves the inclusion of other countries and organizations in the region where the BRICS summit is held, as well as the potential addition of new members. The BRICS+ format is seen as a way to enhance the international influence of the BRICS and create new global governance platforms (LISSOVOLIK, 2024). This expansion reflects the rise of emerging powers and the transformation of the global economic framework (MERINO, 2024). However, there is a need for increased interaction and cooperation among the BRICS economies (BAUMANN, 2009).

4. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road, is an ambitious infrastructure and development project launched by China in 2013, aiming to revitalize the old trade routes connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, promoting regional integration and globalization (GULUZIAN, 2017). Although it presents great economic and trade opportunities, it faces significant challenges in terms of local sustainability and structural barriers. In addition, the initiative is a key strategic tool for China, designed to increase its global influence and promote a multipolar world order (LEVERETT; BINGBING, 2017).

5. The New Development Bank (NDB) is a financial institution created by the BRICS countries to address the lack of infrastructure financing and give developing countries a greater role in the global financial system (LATINO, 2017). Although it follows a similar model to that of other development banks, it seeks to differentiate itself through cooperation with other financial institutions and a focus on sustainable financing. Despite the challenges, the NDB has the potential to become an important tool to encourage investments in large development projects and strengthen economic and trade ties among member countries (WANG, 2019).

6. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is a multilateral financial institution created to address infrastructure needs in Asia and promote sustainable economic development. Its creation reflects both China's frustration with the existing international financial architecture and its ambition to play a more prominent role in global economic governance (MORRIS, 2020). AIIB has introduced innovations in its governance structure and adopted practices from existing development banks to ensure its legitimacy. The international acceptance of the AIIB and its ability to form cooperative partnerships underscore its significant impact on geopolitics and global governance (WILSON, 2019).

7. The International Monetary Fund was established to encourage global monetary cooperation and maintain foreign exchange stability, aiming to support international trade, high employment rates, real income growth and the development of productive resources among all its member countries. However its credibility and effectiveness are at stake due to its governance structure, ideological bias and insufficient reform efforts (TORRES, 2007).

The Belt and Road Initiative⁴ has been widely analyzed in academic literature as an example of China's power projection (Baik, 2019). This initiative not only seeks to improve connectivity and trade between Asia, Europe and Africa, but also strengthens China's influence in the Global South (Gulseven, 2022). Through this initiative, China has been able to consolidate strategic alliances and expand its economic and political influence, promoting infrastructure projects that benefit emerging economies and strengthen its position on the global stage (ECONOMY, 2018).

Moreover, the creation of institutions such as the New Development Bank⁵ (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank⁶ (AIIB) has been central to China's strategy to consolidate its leadership in the BRICS+. These financial institutions not only provide an alternative to traditional Western institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund⁷ (IMF), but also promote economic cooperation and sustainable development among BRICS+ members and other countries in the Global South (Morton, 2016). The literature has highlighted how these institutions have enabled the Asian country to position itself as an advocate of multilateralism and a promoter of a new, more equitable world order.

However, not all is positive in the analysis of China's leadership. Many critics argue that China's strategy represents a new form of economic colonialism (Antiwi-Boateng, 2017). Through its investments and infrastructure projects, China has been accused of creating economic and political dependence in recipient countries, which has led to debates over the true intentions of its leadership in the BRICS+. These critics point out that, while China promotes greater representation of emerging economies, its strategy may be more focused on expanding its own influence and control at the expense of other countries' sovereignty (Hurley; Morris; Portelance, 2019).

This article is part of this academic discussion, providing a comprehensive analysis of China's leadership in the BRICS+ and its impact on the Global South. In order to address the objectives of this paper, a methodology based on literature review and documentary analysis will be employed. Primary and secondary sources will be examined, including academic articles, reports from international institutions, official speeches and case studies. The literature review will identify and synthesize the main academic contributions on the topic, while the documentary analysis will provide a broader historical and political context.

The methodological approach will focus on the identification and analysis of patterns and trends in the participation of the People's Republic of China in the BRICS+, as well as on the assessment of its impact on the Global South. Special attention will be paid to the projects and strategies implemented by the Asian country in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as to the creation and functioning of the aforementioned financial institutions. The documentary analysis will include the review of speeches and official statements by Chinese leaders and other BRICS+ members, as well as reports by international organizations and think tanks.

In order to provide a balanced and well-grounded view of the power

dynamics in the BRICS+ and the implications of China's leadership for the future of the global order, this article is structured in five main sections. The first section presents the consolidation of China's leadership in the BRICS+, analyzing the historical evolution of its participation and the key milestones that accompany it. The second section explores the different types of leadership exercised by China, in light of Correa's classification (Correa da Silva, 2022). It continues with an analysis of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Chinese leadership in the framework of BRICS+ and the Global South.

Fourth, it assesses the impact of China's leadership in the Global South and examines the criticisms it has received, analyzing its promotion of the redefinition of international norms and its promotion of a multipolar world order that challenges Western hegemony. Finally, the fifth and last section presents the article's conclusions, synthesizing the main findings and reflecting on the future of the People's Republic of China's leadership in the BRICS+ and its role in shaping a new world order more favorable to the interests of the Global South.

2 THE CONSOLIDATION OF CHINA'S LEADERSHIP OF THE BRICS+

Beijing's leadership within BRICS+ cannot be fully understood without first analyzing its relationship with the Global South. The concept of the "Global South"⁸ has been the subject of extensive debate, and its application to China raises both theoretical and practical questions (Barany, 2024; Murphy, 2022). Traditionally, the term has been used to refer to middle- and low-income countries with historical trajectories marked by colonialism, economic dependency, and structural inequality within the international system (Levander; Mignolo, 2011). However, China's growing influence has challenged its classification within this framework.

From a postcolonial perspective, the Global South encompasses nations that have historically been marginalized within the Western-led world order and seek alternatives to the economic and political rules imposed by the neoliberal capitalist system (Levander; Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo, 2011). In the case of China, the country continues to identify itself as part of the Global South for both historical and discursive reasons, grounding this claim in its experience of Western colonial intervention during the "Century of Humiliation" (Char, 2024). Additionally, despite being the world's second-largest economy in nominal GDP terms, China has a relatively low GDP per capita compared to economies of the Global North, with many regions still facing challenges related to uneven development (Freeman, 2024). The creation of financial institutions such as the AIIB and the NDB also reflects its ambition to reshape the Western-dominated global financial architecture.

However, despite its self-identification with the Global South, some scholars argue that China has surpassed this status due to its immense economic and military power, high degree of industrialization, and leadership in advanced technologies, placing it in direct competition with traditional global powers (Taylor; Cheng, 2022). Furthermore, critics contend that its infrastructure investments and loan strategies in the Global

8. The term has evolved from a purely geographical notion into a political and economic category. Modern conceptualization acknowledges that divisions are not exclusively spatial but rather reflect structural inequalities in terms of market access, financing, technological development, and political power within global institutions (MIGNOLO, 2011). In any case, this conception is not homogeneous: some Global South countries are emerging economies with significant geopolitical influence, while others lack the structural power to shape global affairs.

South reflect neocolonial tendencies, creating new forms of dependency (Chellaney, 2017). While internal inequalities persist, China's rapid development and significant poverty reduction efforts set it apart from other developing economies. This debate reflects a broader reality regarding the evolution of the international system. Although China has benefited from the rhetoric of South-South solidarity, its economic and geopolitical strength places it in an intermediary category between traditional global powers and developing nations. In many ways, China can be seen as a "hybrid actor": on the one hand, it actively promotes the reconfiguration of the global order in favor of emerging economies, while on the other, it has developed economic and political capabilities that distinguish it significantly from other members of the Global South (Eisenman; Heginbotham, 2019; Sutter, 2023).

This dual positioning has been key to its rise within BRICS+, where it has carefully balanced its identity as an emerging economy with its growing influence as a global power. China's rise as a leader within the BRICS+ has been a gradual and strategic process that has unfolded over two decades, from the creation of the BRIC Forum in 2006 to its assumption of the presidency of the group for the second time in 2021. Along the way, China has implemented a series of carefully planned actions that have allowed it to consolidate its leadership position and become a key player on the global stage. Three distinct periods can be identified:

2.1 Origins and first steps (2006-2010): laying the groundwork for South-South cooperation

The BRIC Forum, created in 2006, emerged as a response to the lack of representation of emerging economies in Western-dominated international institutions. Initially composed of Brazil, Russia, India and China, the group sought to promote cooperation among these nations and strengthen their positions on the global stage (Cooper, 2016). The term "BRIC" was coined by economist Jim O'Neill in 2001, in a Goldman Sachs report that highlighted the growing economic weight of Brazil, Russia, India and China in the world economy. Although the group had no formal structure at the time, China's inclusion in this category was significant, as the country accounted for a large share of global economic growth (Cheng, 2015).

The Asian country was experiencing rapid economic growth and was becoming a world power in terms of production, trade and financial reserves. This economic rise sparked the interest of other emerging economies that shared similar characteristics in terms of population size, natural resources and growth potential (Abdenur, 2014). In this context, emerging economies sought a greater voice and participation in global decision-making. The BRIC Forum became an important platform for dialogue and cooperation among the four emerging economies, laying the groundwork for greater collaboration in various areas such as trade, investment and technology.

2.2 Consolidating China's leadership (2011-2021): a strategic approach to consolidating influence

Starting in 2011, China began to implement concrete actions to consolidate its leadership within BRICS+. The establishment of the BRICS NDB in the same year marked a crucial milestone, followed by the creation of the AIIB in 2016 (Iqbal; Rahman; Rahman, 2020). The BRICS Development Bank was born as an alternative to international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, criticized for their lack of representativeness and their pro-developed country policies.

China created the NDB with the aim of responding to the needs of emerging economies, promoting South-South cooperation and challenging Western dominance in the international financial system (Iqbal; Rahman; Rahman, 2020). The NDB became an important source of financing for development projects in countries of the Global South, reinforcing China's economic influence within BRICS+ by establishing itself as the institution's main investor.

China sought to complement the NDB with a multilateral financial institution focused on Asia, the region of greatest strategic interest to the country. The AIIB was created with the aim of financing infrastructure projects in Asia, promoting regional development, strengthening China's economic influence in the region and challenging the dominance of the US-led Asian Development Bank⁹ (ADB). The AIIB has become an important source of financing for infrastructure projects in Asia, competing directly with the ADB and increasing China's economic influence in the region (Mahmood et al., 2022).

In 2021, China assumed the BRICS+ presidency for the second time, reflecting its growing leadership within the group. Under the Chinese presidency, the group is committed to promoting South-South cooperation, upholding multilateralism, strengthening BRICS+ as a platform for dialogue and collaboration among emerging economies and contributing to building a fairer and more equitable international order (Cooper, 2017). The historical evolution of China's participation in the BRICS+ has been marked by a clear and consistent strategy: consolidating its leadership position through economic power, political influence and the ability to offer solutions to the problems of the Global South. The BRI, the NDB and the AIIB are tangible examples of this strategy, which has enabled China to position itself as a global leader in the current landscape.

9. The Asian Development Bank is a key institution in promoting economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific. Since its founding in 1966, it has grown in membership and capital, playing a crucial role in regional cooperation and economic development (NAKAO, 2017). The United States has had considerable influence on the formation and structure of the ADB, using the bank to expand its economic and political influence in the region (DUTT, 2001).

2.3 New challenges and issues (2022-today): membership enlargement and the Chinese slowdown

While China's chairmanship in 2021 marked an important milestone in its leadership of the bloc, the evolution of the group and China's influence does not stop there. From 2022 onwards, there are some elements that could characterize a third phase in China's participation in BRICS+. August 2023 sees the addition of new members, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates and others, opening up the possibility of BRICS+ becoming a more heterogeneous platform

with more diverse interests and priorities. This could dilute China's relative influence within the group (Cochrane; Zaidan, 2024).

This period saw the consolidation of China's agenda, exemplified by the promotion of the Global Security Initiative proposed by the country as an alternative to the international order led by the United States. This initiative is based on six fundamental principles, including a vision of common, cooperative, comprehensive and sustainable security, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries and the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and dispute (Cochrane; Zaidan, 2024). Similarly, it emphasizes the importance of environmental sustainability and climate change while advancing digital cooperation and the development of information and communication technologies (Al-Aiban, 2024)

In addition to the aforementioned, other challenges that the Asian power would have to face in this new stage of the bloc include the effect that geopolitical tensions and rivalries between the great powers could have on the cohesion and functioning of the group. Similarly, China's economic slowdown and rising domestic debt could limit its capacity to finance projects and initiatives within the group, putting pressure on its leadership, while criticism of the lack of transparency and accountability in some of the projects launched could increase.

Despite skepticism about the effectiveness of BRICS+, Western powers are stepping up their engagement efforts, recognizing the group's growing importance. However, underlying strategic divergences persist among member states, reflecting a nuanced interplay of geopolitical ambitions and development imperatives. Amidst these complexities, however, common ground is found in addressing pressing global challenges, especially in reforming financial architectures (Darnal et al., 2023).

3 THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHINESE LEADERSHIP IN THE BRICS+

The rise of the People's Republic of China as a global power has had a significant impact on the geopolitical landscape, including its role within the group that this article reviews. In order to understand the power's leadership in this context, it is useful to analyze it through the different models of international leadership set out by professor Correa (Correa da Silva, 2022): hierarchical, functional, relational, discursive and critical.

First, the hierarchical or structural model is based on the idea that international leadership is determined by a state's position of power in the international system. States with greater economic, military or political power have a greater ability to influence other states and set the international agenda (Helms apud Correa, 2022). This approach is commonly associated with realist international relations theory and hegemonic theory.

From this hierarchical or structural perspective, China's leadership in the BRICS+ is based on its growing economic and military power. China is the largest economy in the group and possesses significant military muscle, which gives it a considerable position of influence. In turn, it has used its economic power to drive infrastructure and development

projects in other BRICS+ countries, increasing their economic interdependence and strengthening its leadership position. However, this hierarchical approach has also generated some criticism, as some BRICS+ members might perceive China's influence as excessive or overbearing, even more so when it has some open confrontations over territorial disputes, as might be the case with India, with the recent border skirmishes that erupted between the two countries in May 2020.

Functional leadership, also referred to as behavioral leadership, focuses on the actions and roles that leaders play in international problem solving. Effective leaders are thus those who can identify problems, propose solutions, mobilize resources and build consensus among states (Keohane 2010, apud Correa, 2022). This approach is associated with institutional liberalism and global governance theory.

Following this model, China has demonstrated effective functional leadership in the BRICS+ by proposing initiatives and solutions to common problems faced by member countries. A notable example is the creation of the NDB, a multilateral financial institution driven by China to support infrastructure and development projects in emerging countries, as we have noted above. China has also played an active role in promoting South-South cooperation and defending the interests of developing countries in international fora.

Third, we find relational leadership. This model emphasizes the importance of relationships and networks among international actors for leadership, which is not exercised exclusively by a state with power but arises from interaction and cooperation among multiple actors (Uhl-Bien 2011, apud Correa, 2022). Thus, this approach highlights the divergence between leadership and hegemony, arguing that the former is also capable of directing the achievement of goals without relying exclusively on traditional power to achieve the goals of different actors (Clark 2011, apud Correa, 2022). Relational leadership is associated with constructivism and actor-network theory.

The People's Republic of China has cultivated close relations with the other BRICS+ countries through bilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. The BRICS+ Leaders' Forum has become an important platform for the exchange of ideas and policy coordination among the members of the group. China has also established bilateral cooperation agreements with each of the countries that make up the bloc, covering diverse areas such as trade, investment, technology and culture.

Fourth, we find the discursive leadership model. This highlights the role of language and communication in the exercise of international leadership. It states that effective leaders are those who can use language to persuade, inspire and legitimize their worldview (Nabers, 2008, apud Correa, 2022). This model understands that "leadership is conditioned by structures and process, given that the environment in which leadership unfolds is both material and ideational" (Correa da Silva, 2022). This approach is often associated with constructivism and discourse theory.

Following the discursive model, China has used discourse to articulate a worldview that resonates with the BRICS+ countries, emphasizing the importance of multilateralism, South-South cooperation and

10. Studies show how the most important Chinese companies have a strategic intention when taking acquisition decisions in Europe and other parts of the world. The final strategic objective is to obtain sustainable competitive advantages by transforming into a global player, once a national player (RUI; YIP, 2008).

sustainable development. The concept of the Belt and Road Initiative (commonly referred to in academia as the New Silk Road) is presented as a global vision that promotes connectivity, trade and development between Asia, Europe and Africa, resonating with the BRICS+ countries.

China has also used its influence in the media to promote its narrative and position itself as a responsible global leader. There are multiple examples to support this claim: China has an extensive and well-funded state media network, such as CCTV and Xinhua, which broadcast globally in multiple languages and disseminate the Chinese government's official narrative (Lu; Xu, 2020). Similarly, China has invested significantly in foreign media, acquiring shares and entering into strategic alliances¹⁰.

Finally, we find the critical leadership model. This challenges the idea that international leadership is always positive or beneficial. It points out that leadership can be used to promote hegemonic interests and maintain unjust power structures. In this way, "leadership is associated with the international organic elite, whose function is to forge consensus through coordination, organization and monitoring of shared goals" (Correa da Silva, 2022). This approach is associated with critical studies and post-colonial theory.

Some critics of Beijing's leadership in BRICS+ argue that it is based on hegemonic interests and promotes a model of globalization that essentially benefits China (Antwi-Boateng, 2017). They point out that China has used its economic power to pressure other countries in the bloc to adopt its policies and priorities, while criticizing the lack of transparency and accountability in the institutions led by the People's Republic of China, such as the NDB.

The five models of international leadership presented here offer different perspectives on the nature and exercise of leadership in the global arena. It is important to understand these different approaches in order to critically analyze the leadership roles assumed by states and other actors in the international arena. Thus, in the case at hand, China's leadership in the BRICS+ is complex and multifaceted. Chinese leadership can be analyzed from different perspectives, each of which offers a partial understanding of the phenomenon.

4 THE MAIN STRATEGIES OF BEIJING TO CONSOLIDATE ITS POWER IN THE BRICS+

4.1 *The Belt and Road Initiative as a pillar of China's leadership in BRICS+*

China has consolidated its leadership within BRICS+ not only due to its economic power but also through strategies that strengthen its influence in the Global South. The Belt and Road Initiative has been a key component of this strategy, allowing China to project its development model in BRICS+ member countries (Nascimento; Maynetto, 2019). Since its launch in 2013, the BRI has facilitated investments in infrastructure, trade, and economic integration, reinforcing these countries' interdependence with China and expanding its diplomatic reach. This initiative has

not only fostered growth in recipient countries but has also positioned China as the main driver of a multipolar economic order (Petry, 2023).

Through the BRI, China has linked its leadership within BRICS+ to the expansion of its trade and financial networks. Institutions such as the NDB and the AIIB have provided alternative financing to member countries, reducing their dependence on Western organizations such as the IMF (Mahmood et al., 2022). However, this leadership is not without challenges: while countries like Russia and South Africa have supported the BRI, others, such as India and Brazil¹¹, have expressed reservations about the risks of economic dependence and the lack of transparency in projects funded by China. Their governments also fear that the BRI could reinforce China's hegemony at the expense of a more balanced leadership within the group.

The People's Republic has repeatedly presented the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity for the countries of the bloc to cooperate on infrastructure and development projects that benefit all members of the group (Bandeira; Tsiropoulos, 2020). China has used its leadership position to promote its project within BRICS+ and secure the participation of other member countries. This has allowed the Asian country to strengthen its economic and political ties with the countries in the group, increasing its influence in the Global South and on the global stage (Hillman, 2020).

The New Silk Road has significantly boosted the construction of infrastructure in the bloc's member countries, including roads, railways and ports. In the first case, the Chinese project has financed the construction of thousands of kilometers of new roads in countries such as India, Brazil and Russia, improving regional connectivity and facilitating the transport of goods and people (De Soyres; Mulabdic; Ruta, 2020). A notable example is the so-called Middle Corridor (officially known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route or TITR), which connects China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia (Hussain, 2021).

Similarly, the initiative has enabled the construction of new high-speed rail lines in countries such as Brazil and South Africa, reducing travel times and increasing the efficiency of rail transport (Liu; Dunford, 2016). The Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone in South Africa and Zimbabwe is a good example of China's important role in the country. Funded by the China Development Bank and built by the China Railway Construction Corporation, a railway facilitates the transport of goods between the two countries (Bond, 2021).

For its part, the Belt and Road Initiative has facilitated trade between China and BRICS+ members through reduced transportation costs, increased connectivity or the promotion of trade agreements, which has allowed bilateral trade to grow (Deepak, 2018). The construction of infrastructure has not infrequently been conditional on the promotion of trade agreements, reducing tariffs and facilitating the flow of goods and services. The New Silk Road has facilitated and improved the connectivity of the People's Republic with the countries of the bloc, opening new trade routes and facilitating access to new markets (ECONOMY, 2018).

An example of this is the momentum seen in bilateral trade between China and India, which has reduced tariffs for trade in goods and

11. India has been particularly critical, arguing that the Chinese project ignores sovereignty concerns and represents a model of geopolitical expansion disguised as economic cooperation (AHAMED; RAHMAN, 2020). Brazil, mainly during the government of Jair Bolsonaro, said that the country should avoid excessive dependence on foreign investments that do not favor the development of its own infrastructure (BARRUCHO, 2023).

12. However, the high trade deficits, the unequal structure of exports and imports, closed markets, high tariff and non-tariff barriers and India's trade dependence on China hamper effective trade development (GALISTCHEVA; RESHCHIKOVA, 2022).

services between the two countries. Bilateral trade has grown considerably in this time, from \$10 billion in 2001 to \$132 billion in 2023¹² (Haidar, 2024). Similarly, bilateral trade between South Africa and the People's Republic has settled down in recent years, with tariffs eliminated on a wide range of products traded between the two powers (Bond, 2021). In this case, trade between the two powers has grown from \$6.2 billion in 2001 to \$75 billion in 2021.

The People's Republic has simultaneously made significant investments in key sectors of the BRICS+ economies under the New Silk Road, including energy projects in countries such as Brazil, Russia and South Africa to secure the energy supply of their growing economies, the construction of telecommunications networks or the creation of industrial zones to promote technology transfer and job creation (Zhang; Zhang; Xiao, 2022). In manufacturing, the creation of the Sino-Brazilian industrial zone in Manaus, which is home to more than 60 Chinese companies, stands out (Brito, 2017).

All of the above-mentioned projects, funded under China's Belt and Road Initiative, have boosted South-South cooperation in various areas. The BRI has facilitated platforms for the exchange of experiences and best practices in various fields, such as science, technology, sustainable development and governance (Visvizi; Lytras; Jin, 2020). Similarly, China has implemented scholarship and training programs for professionals from the BRICS+ countries, with the aim of strengthening their skills and knowledge in areas relevant to the New Silk Road (Zhang; Zhang; Xiao, 2022). Collaboration in research and development projects has been a key element of China's South-South cooperation (Vadell; Brutto; Leite, 2020).

Finally, the BRI has led to the creation of new cooperation mechanisms between China and the countries of the bloc, such as the AIIB and the NDB. These multilateral financial institutions provide financial support and technical assistance for infrastructure and development projects in the region, fostering collaboration and joint investment and will be discussed later (Wang, 2019). The People's Republic of China's Belt and Road Initiative has brought with it a multitude of possibilities for the BRICS+ countries, promoting not only infrastructure development, but also trade, investment and South-South cooperation (Cooper, 2017). However, the Chinese project is not without its challenges and criticisms, which must be taken into consideration to ensure its long-term sustainability and benefits.

One of the main challenges of the initiative is the increase in debt in some of the bloc's countries, especially those with less developed economies, what has been called as "debt-trap diplomacy" (Chellaney, 2017). Chinese loans to finance infrastructure projects have significantly increased the external debt of these countries, which could generate problems of financial sustainability in the future and grant Beijing leverage over their economy and political decisions (Bagwandeem, 2022). A case in point is the aforementioned rail project, "China is a major foreign finance provider for African railway systems, focusing on the needs of recipient countries but also commercial interests play a role in this allocation to

complement World Bank funding and fill the financing gap in the sector” (Marson; Maggi; Scacchi, 2021).

This critique has been particularly relevant in Africa and Asia, where several countries have accumulated significant debt to finance large-scale infrastructure projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative. The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is often cited as the most prominent example of debt-trap diplomacy. In 2017, Sri Lanka, unable to meet its debt obligations, granted China a 99-year lease on the strategically located port (Abi-Habib, 2018). This fueled concerns that China was using infrastructure investment as a tool for geopolitical expansion, securing key assets in developing nations under the guise of economic cooperation (Hewamanne, 2023).

The lack of transparency in project selection, loan terms and the use of funds has led to doubts and criticism of the initiative. At the same time, concerns are growing over the environmental impact of projects funded under the New Silk Road. Deforestation, destruction of natural habitats and water pollution are some of the problems that critics regularly point to (Tracy et al., 2017). For example, the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric project in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest, which is estimated to have led to the deforestation of 40,000 hectares of rainforest, the destruction of natural habitats and the displacement of indigenous communities (Fearnside, 2006). Critics argue that China's extensive investment in natural resource extraction, particularly in Africa and Latin America, mirrors historical patterns of economic exploitation where raw materials are extracted from developing nations while high-value manufacturing remains concentrated in China (Antwi-Boateng, 2017).

Finally, numerous Chinese aid projects have failed due to the lack of communication between the Asian country and the direct recipients of the investments, with the former being unaware of the latter's true needs (Diakite, 2023). For the Chinese project to have a more effective and transformative impact on the Global South, it is necessary to involve the beneficiaries directly in the design and implementation of the projects, “going beyond rhetoric to integrate practices and create intervention models that focus on the needs of the direct beneficiaries” (Diakite 2023: 100).

The Belt and Road Initiative has been a central component of China's leadership within BRICS+ and has had a significant impact on the relations and development of the group's member countries. The initiative has enabled the People's Republic to strengthen its economic and political ties with the countries of the bloc, increasing its influence and leadership within the bloc, as well as on the global stage, facilitating cooperation and development in the countries of the bloc (Liu; Dunford, 2016). Through infrastructure investments and trade promotion, China has increased its influence in the Global South. However, to maintain its leadership and ensure long-term benefits, China must address the challenges and criticisms associated with the project by promoting greater transparency, financial sustainability and environmental responsibility.

4.2 China's global initiatives: A new model for development and security?

Chinese leadership has become particularly evident over the past decade, as China has adopted a stance as a “norm entrepreneur”, seeking to redefine the rules of the global system through its own proposals and institutional structures (Kewalramani, 2024). In this context, three initiatives promoted by Xi Jinping —the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)— have served as pillars for consolidating Chinese leadership within BRICS+ and the Global South. These initiatives not only seek to expand China's influence but also offer an alternative to Western-dominated norms and institutions, promoting an order more aligned with the interests of developing countries.

The GDI, introduced in 2021, has been China's vehicle for positioning itself as a key player in global development, offering financing and technical cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, poverty reduction, and digital development. This initiative has helped strengthen economic interdependence among BRICS+ members, promoting a growth model based on South-South cooperation. However, it has also raised concerns in countries such as Brazil and India, where there are fears that Chinese financing could translate into economic dependence, limiting the autonomy of recipient nations (Cochrane; Zaidan, 2024).

In the realm of security, the GSI, announced in 2022, aims to establish an alternative security framework that rejects the mentality of military blocs and interference in the internal affairs of states. Unlike the GDI, which operates through mechanisms like the “Group of Friends,” the GSI lacks a formal coordination structure, with China instead emphasizing that over ninety countries and organizations have expressed “appreciation and support” for the initiative (Kewalramani, 2024). This absence of an institutionalized mechanism appears to be both a deliberate effort to avoid the optics of bloc politics and a reflection of developing countries' hesitations toward fully committing to Beijing's vision (Yip, 2024).

Finally, the GCI, introduced in 2023, reinforces China's narrative of a multipolar world where civilizations should coexist without external impositions of values or political models. China argues that cultural diversity should be a pillar of the international order, challenging the universality of Western democratic values and promoting a more relativistic approach to human rights and governance. This initiative has been well received by countries such as Russia and South Africa, while Brazil has shown some ambivalence, suggesting that the GCI could be used as a soft power tool to legitimize China's political model within the Global South (Kewalramani, 2024).

5 REDEFINING THE WORLD ORDER UNDER CHINESE LEADERSHIP IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

China's rise as a global power has led to a significant reconfiguration of international norms and the balance of power in the system. Within the BRICS+ framework, China has played a key role in promoting a multipolar

world order and challenging Western hegemony. China's leadership in re-defining international norms has been evident on several fronts.

China has played an active and significant role in reshaping international financial institutions, advocating reforms that better reflect the economic weight of emerging economies, particularly the BRICS countries. This effort has been an integral part of China's strategy to balance power in global economic governance and promote a more multipolar world order (Morozkina, 2015). The IMF has been one of the main institutions in which the power has sought to implement reforms (Mahmood et al., 2022).

The People's Republic has strongly advocated for a realignment of quotas and voting rights in the IMF to more fairly reflect the economic importance of the BRICS+ countries and other emerging economies. These efforts have led to some changes, such as the 2010 quota reform, which slightly increased the representation of emerging economies (Cooper, 2017). In addition to the quota adjustment, China has pushed for reforms in IMF governance to give emerging economies a stronger voice in decision-making, including greater representation of these countries at the highest levels of management (Dixon, 2015).

Recognizing the limitations and resistance to reform in existing institutions, China has led the way in creating new international financial institutions to serve as alternatives to those dominated by the West. At this point it is relevant to highlight the NDB, established in 2014 by the BRICS countries (prior to their expansion) with the aim of creating a financial institution that would offer fairer and more equitable alternatives to those dominated by the West (Wang, 2019).

Thus, the countries of the bloc played an essential role in shaping and launching the NDB, contributing seed capital and participating in the governance of the institution (Cooper, 2017). However, China's leadership has been particularly prominent, reflecting its economic capacity, its strategic interest in fostering South-South cooperation and its ability to influence the agenda of the rest of the countries in the group (Abdenur, 2014). China's leadership is not only manifested in its financial contribution to the NDB, which is crucial for the bank's start-up and operation, but also in terms of governance and leadership.

In these terms, the People's Republic has secured an influential position within the NDB, which established its headquarters in Shanghai. Furthermore, China has promoted governance principles that emphasize equity, inclusiveness and consensus-based decision-making, seeking to differentiate itself from the more hierarchical practices of Western institutions (Morozkina, 2015). Moreover, China's strategic vision for the NDB aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative, seeking synergies between bank-funded projects and the BRI's global connectivity and development goals (Bandiera; Tsiropoulos, 2020). Unlike traditional financial institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank, the NDB focuses on financing infrastructure and sustainable development projects with more flexible lending conditions, without limiting the economic sovereignty of recipient countries (Morozkina, 2015). While it is not exempt from certain conditions and criteria for project approval, these tend to be less intrusive

and less geared towards structural reforms that could limit such sovereignty (Dixon, 2015).

While the NDB is still a relatively young institution, it has gained popularity among countries in the Global South, having approved more than 200 loans totaling more than \$80 billion across a wide range of sectors (Dixon, 2015). Similarly, the bank has expanded its membership beyond the BRICS countries to include Egypt, Uruguay and Bangladesh. China has been the strongest advocate for expanding the NDB. However, this push has met resistance, particularly from India and Brazil, which fear that expansion could increase China's influence within the bank and shift its governance structure in Beijing's favor. India has been especially wary, opposing attempts to link NDB financing with China's BRI and resisting Beijing's efforts to integrate the bank into the Multilateral Cooperation Center for Development Finance (MCDF)¹³. Despite these concerns, China successfully secured a majority vote to align the NDB with the MCDF, highlighting both Beijing's strategic maneuvering and the internal fractures within BRICS+ (Zhu, 2024). Additionally, Russia, initially reluctant about expansion, has come to see it as a way to maintain financial stability amid Western sanctions, underscoring the geopolitical stakes of the NDB's evolution.

13. The MCDF is considered a BRI-related multilateral financing platform, so India opposed efforts to link NDB financing with BRI-related projects, seeing this as an attempt by Beijing to use the bank as an extension of its geoeconomic strategy.

Beyond geopolitical rivalries, China views NDB expansion as a way to counterbalance Western financial influence while ensuring the bank's long-term viability. The NDB operates under an equal contribution-equal voice model, limiting China's unilateral control, but by incorporating new members, Beijing aims to dilute internal opposition from countries like India while broadening the bank's funding base (Zhu, 2024). However, this raises concerns about governance efficiency, as a more diverse membership could complicate decision-making and reduce the institution's responsiveness to financial crises. Ultimately, the NDB's expansion reflects the broader tension within BRICS+: China's ambition to lead a new global financial order versus the need to maintain a balanced, consensus-driven institution (Zhu, 2024). This expansion takes part of a wider process of empowerment of the emerging economies in the international arena that can be analyzed from several perspectives:

First, there is a redistribution of economic and financial power with the creation of new institutions, such as the NDB and the AIIB, as alternatives to traditional institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Secondly, infrastructure projects are essential for sustainable economic growth. However, high costs and lack of access to favorable financing have hindered progress in many regions (Wang, 2019). In this regard, the NDB and AIIB has provided loans with more flexible and favorable terms, accelerating infrastructure development in countries in the Global South and improving regional and global connectivity (Cooper, 2017).

The empowerment of emerging economies is also manifested in the promotion of South-South cooperation. In contrast to North-South cooperation, which is often characterized by asymmetric power relations and dependence, South-South cooperation can also be seen in the promotion of South-South cooperation (Abdenur, 2014). South-South cooperation seeks to adopt an approach based on equality and mutual

benefit, providing platforms for developing countries to work together. This cooperation in turn strengthens solidarity among developing countries, enabling them to address common challenges and seize collective opportunities.

However, China's growing influence in the Global South has not been without controversy. In addition of the debt-trap diplomacy and neocolonial economic practices accusations aforementioned, another persistent criticism of China's leadership in the Global South is its perceived role in reinforcing authoritarian governance. Scholars argue that China's economic model, which combines state capitalism with strict political control, serves as an attractive alternative for authoritarian and hybrid regimes seeking to consolidate power while maintaining economic growth (Lagerkvist, 2021). This so-called "Beijing Consensus" contrasts with the Western model of democracy promotion and market liberalization, emphasizing state-led development, non-interference in domestic affairs, and political stability over democratic governance. However, defenders of China's engagement argue that its policies reflect a commitment to sovereignty and non-intervention rather than an ideological push for authoritarianism (Carmody; Taylor; Zajontz, 2022).

China's leadership in reshaping the global order, particularly within the Global South, can be further understood through the framework of moral realism, as developed by Xuetong (2024). This theory challenges purely systemic explanations of international change by emphasizing the decisive role of leadership and its perceived moral legitimacy. Unlike Western-dominated institutions that often impose conditionalities, China presents itself as a leader committed to equity and inclusiveness, particularly through institutions like the NDB. However, moral realism also highlights that leadership is not just about material power but about gaining acceptance from other actors. While China has successfully positioned itself as an alternative leader in global governance, its expanding influence has sparked resistance, particularly within BRICS+, where India and Brazil have expressed concerns over China's growing role. This tension underscores a fundamental challenge in redefining the world order: achieving legitimacy and strategic credibility in a multipolar system (Xuetong, 2024).

6 CONCLUSIONS

China has consolidated its leadership in the BRICS+ through a gradual and strategic process that spans from the creation of the BRIC Forum in 2006 to its chairmanship in 2021. This leadership has been built on planned actions that have strengthened its position on the global stage. Central to this consolidation has been the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, which has promoted connectivity and development in the Global South.

In the realm of BRICS+ internal dynamics, China has played a crucial role in harmonizing interests within the group. Using the Belt and Road Initiative, it has been able to consolidate its influence, facilitating collaboration on infrastructure and development projects that benefit

member countries. In addition, the creation of institutions such as the NDB and the AIIB has been instrumental in supporting these projects and strengthening China's position in the group.

Beijing's leadership in BRICS+ is multifaceted, encompassing various models of international leadership. Hierarchically, China's economic and military power provides significant influence, though this dominance can be contentious. Functionally, China has driven key initiatives like the NDB, promoting South-South cooperation. Relationally, China has fostered strong bilateral and multilateral ties within BRICS+. Discursively, China effectively uses language and media to promote its vision of multilateralism. Critically, some argue China's leadership serves its hegemonic interests, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Each model offers a unique perspective, collectively providing a comprehensive understanding of China's complex role in BRICS+.

The impact of Chinese leadership in the Global South has been significant, promoting the redefinition of international norms and fostering a multipolar world order that challenges Western hegemony. This approach has found resonance with many countries in the Global South seeking greater representation and voice in global affairs. However, China's strategy has not been without its critics. Some argue that Chinese investments and infrastructure projects create economic and political dependence, which could be seen as a new form of economic colonialism. These critics highlight the need for transparency and accountability in Chinese-led initiatives.

Looking ahead, China's leadership in the BRICS+ presents both challenges and opportunities. The expansion of its economic and political influence may lead to a greater balance of power, but it also raises questions about the long-term intentions and effects of its strategy. China promotes a model of globalization that seeks to be inclusive and beneficial to emerging economies, although the sustainability of this model will depend on its ability to balance its own interests with those of the other countries in the group.

The long-term vision of China's leadership in BRICS+ focuses on strengthening multilateralism and South-South cooperation. China aspires to a world order where emerging economies play a more prominent role and can influence global decisions more equitably. The emphasis on sustainable development and global connectivity suggests that China will continue to promote projects that not only benefit its BRICS+ partners, but also contribute to global economic and social development.

Ultimately, the People's Republic of China's leadership of BRICS+ and its promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative reflect its vision of a more equitable and multipolar world order. By challenging Western hegemony and advocating for greater representation of emerging economies in international institutions, China seeks to reshape the global system to be more favorable to the interests of the Global South. The New Silk Road is a manifestation of this strategy, using China's economic and diplomatic power to promote a new world order.

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