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## Understanding Indonesia's BRICS Membership: A Role Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

Indonesia's decision under President Prabowo Subianto to pursue full membership in BRICS marks a significant recalibration of its foreign policy orientation amid intensifying global polarization. This article addresses the puzzle of why Indonesia—long associated with a Free and Active foreign policy, non-alignment, and ASEAN centrality—has chosen to join a grouping often perceived as a counterweight to the Western-led international order. Drawing on Role Theory and qualitative analysis, the article argues that Indonesia's BRICS membership reflects an evolving middle-power role conception through which Jakarta seeks to reposition itself as an independent *bridge builder* and a *voice for the Global South*. These role aspirations, however, generate role conflicts arising from competing expectations held by ASEAN partners, Western states, and BRICS members themselves, potentially complicating Indonesia's regional leadership and external relations. By examining the negotiation between role conceptions, role enactment, and role conflict, the article contributes to debates on middle-power behavior and demonstrates the analytical value of Role Theory for understanding how emerging powers navigate multilateral institutions in a fragmented global order.

**Keywords:** *Indonesia, BRICS Membership, Roles*

### Abstrak

*Keputusan Indonesia di bawah Presiden Prabowo Subianto untuk menjadi anggota BRICS menandai perubahan penting dalam orientasi kebijakan luar negeri di tengah polarisasi global yang semakin tajam. Artikel ini mengkaji alasan di balik langkah tersebut, mengingat Indonesia selama ini dikenal dengan politik luar negeri Bebas dan Aktif, sikap non-blok, serta komitmen pada sentralitas ASEAN. Dengan menggunakan Teori Peran dan analisis kualitatif, artikel ini berargumen bahwa keanggotaan Indonesia dalam BRICS mencerminkan evolusi konsepsi peran negara menengah, di mana Jakarta berupaya tampil sebagai 'bridge builder' sekaligus suara bagi Global South. Namun, aspirasi peran ini memunculkan konflik peran akibat ekspektasi yang berbeda dari mitra ASEAN, negara Barat, dan anggota BRICS, yang berpotensi menyulitkan kepemimpinan regional dan hubungan eksternal Indonesia. Dengan menelaah interaksi antara konsepsi peran, pelaksanaan peran, dan konflik peran, artikel ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan mengenai perilaku negara menengah serta menegaskan relevansi Teori Peran dalam memahami bagaimana emerging power menavigasi institusi multilateral dalam tatanan global yang terfragmentasi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Indonesia, Keanggotaan BRICS, Peran*



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## Introduction

BRICS—an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—has emerged as a loosely structured coalition of major emerging economies seeking to amplify their collective influence in global economics and politics. The grouping represents a notable shift in contemporary international dynamics, striving to challenge the prevailing dominance of Western-centric institutions (Ferragamo, 2025; Gabuev & Stuenkel, 2024). Its growing appeal among Global South countries reflects a search for more balanced and inclusive frameworks of cooperation.

Against this backdrop, Indonesia's formal accession to BRICS on 6 January 2025 represents a striking foreign policy development. The decision followed a rapid shift under newly inaugurated President Prabowo Subianto, who submitted Indonesia's application during the BRICS Summit in Kazan in October 2024. This move departed from the cautious approach of former President Joko Widodo, who had declined membership at the 15th BRICS Summit in 2023 due to concerns that joining a grouping including Russia could compromise Indonesia's long-standing commitment to a "free and active" foreign policy (Azis, 2024; He, 2023; Rueland, 2023). The speed and decisiveness of this policy reversal render Indonesia's BRICS membership both analytically intriguing and politically consequential.

Indonesian officials have framed BRICS accession as consistent with established diplomatic principles rather than a strategic realignment. Foreign Minister Sugiono characterized the move as a reaffirmation of Indonesia's free and active doctrine, emphasizing balanced engagement and resistance to exclusive bloc politics (Reuters, 2024; Sugiono, 2024; Wardah, 2025). President Prabowo similarly articulated Indonesia's aspiration to play a leadership role within the Global South, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described Indonesia as a "bridge builder" amid growing global uncertainty (Antaranews, 2024, 2025a). Together, these narratives underscore Indonesia's self-conception as a constructive and autonomous actor in multilateral diplomacy, while also revealing the symbolic significance attached to BRICS membership.

At the same time, Indonesia's accession has generated polarized debate. Critics question the economic rationale for joining BRICS, noting that Indonesia already benefits from established platforms such as the G20 and RCEP, which provide substantial economic integration without the geopolitical baggage often associated with BRICS (Ghifari, 2023;



Gozali & Pashya, 2024; Shofa, 2023) Others highlight the asymmetrical nature of intra-BRICS economic relations—particularly China’s dominance—and warn that membership could signal alignment with revisionist powers, potentially straining relations with Western partners and complicating Indonesia’s leadership role within ASEAN (Fitriani, 2025). These concerns point to deeper tensions surrounding Indonesia’s evolving international posture.

This article interrogates the strategic motivations behind Indonesia’s decision to join BRICS by asking why a country long committed to non-alignment and ASEAN centrality would seek membership in a forum frequently perceived as a counterweight to the Western-led international order. It argues that Indonesia’s BRICS initiative reflects an evolving role conception through which Jakarta aspires to elevate itself as both a bridge builder and a leading voice of the Global South within a more influential global platform. However, these ambitions also generate role conflicts, particularly where BRICS engagement risks undermining ASEAN credibility or complicating relations with democratic partners in the West.

To analyze these dynamics, the article employs Role Theory as its analytical framework, focusing on the interaction between Indonesia’s self-conceptions, external expectations, and domestic contestations. By examining processes of role articulation, enactment, and conflict, the study assesses whether Indonesia’s BRICS membership represents continuity within its free and active foreign policy tradition or signals a broader recalibration of its international identity amid contested multilateralism. In doing so, the article contributes to debates on middle-power behavior and the performative dimensions of foreign policy in an increasingly fragmented global order.

The article proceeds as follows. It first outlines the Role Theory framework used to analyze Indonesia’s foreign policy behavior. It then examines the strategic significance of BRICS and Indonesia’s evolving role conceptions within the grouping, before assessing the role conflicts and tensions arising from competing regional and global expectations.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Early scholarly assessments of BRICS were marked by cautious optimism regarding the grouping’s potential to reshape global economic and political structures. Initially BRICS was conceived as a coalition of major emerging economies. However, early scepticism quickly



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emerged concerning the group's internal coherence and political effectiveness. Pant (2013), for instance, argues that BRICS has struggled to convert its aggregate economic weight into meaningful collective influence. He contends that structural asymmetries, divergent strategic priorities, and the disproportionate influence of China have limited BRICS' ability to function as a unified political actor. From this perspective, BRICS appeared more symbolic than substantive, constrained by internal divisions and mutual distrust.

Subsequent scholarship has moved beyond this initial scepticism by reassessing BRICS' objectives and modes of operation. Rather than viewing BRICS as an incipient alliance or a revolutionary challenger to the liberal international order, scholars increasingly frame it as a flexible platform for coordination among heterogeneous actors. Stuenkel (2020) argues that BRICS does not seek to overturn existing global institutions but instead aims to promote a more pluralistic and multipolar order by reforming governance structures from within. Similarly, Monyae and Ndzendze (2021) emphasise BRICS' character as a multilateral forum rather than a formal bloc, highlighting its loose institutional design and tolerance for internal diversity. This strand of literature reframes BRICS as a pragmatic response to dissatisfaction with Western-led institutions rather than an explicitly counter-hegemonic project.

Despite persistent internal tensions, scholars also point to BRICS' capacity for institutional innovation. Roberts, Armijo, and Katada (2018) demonstrate how the establishment of the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement reflects a form of "financial statecraft," allowing BRICS members to partially hedge against Western-dominated financial regimes. While acknowledging the absence of a shared vision for a new world order, these authors argue that BRICS members are united by a common resistance to Western dominance and conditionality. In this sense, BRICS represents an incremental rather than revolutionary challenge to existing structures of global governance.

A related body of work situates BRICS within broader debates on Global South cooperation. Duggan et al. (2022) note that BRICS members share commitments to national sovereignty, development-oriented growth, and greater representation in international institutions. At the same time, they caution that geopolitical rivalries—particularly involving China, India, and Russia—continue to undermine cohesion and limit collective action.



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Nevertheless, BRICS remains one of the most comprehensive platforms through which emerging economies articulate shared grievances and pursue South–South cooperation within a fragmented international system.

Taken together, this literature converges on several points. First, BRICS is best understood neither as a unified geopolitical bloc nor as a purely symbolic forum, but as a loosely institutionalised platform characterised by diversity, flexibility, and strategic ambiguity. Second, while scholars increasingly recognise BRICS’ institutional and normative significance, most analyses remain structural or system-level, focusing on power shifts, governance reform, or institutional design. As a result, the agency of individual member states—particularly how they interpret, perform, and negotiate their positions within BRICS—remains underexplored.

This gap is especially noticeable in relation to BRICS expansion. The majority of existing studies concentrate on the original five members, offering limited insight into how newly admitted states engage with the grouping or how their inclusion reshapes BRICS’ internal dynamics. As BRICS evolves into a more inclusive and geographically diverse platform, understanding the strategic orientations of new members such as Indonesia becomes increasingly important. More specifically, there is a need for analytical frameworks that capture not only material interests, but also how states conceptualise their roles, respond to external expectations, and manage tensions between multiple institutional commitments.

This study applies Role Theory to analyse Indonesia's motivations following its accession to BRICS. Originally 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 offers a conceptual lens for understanding how states define, negotiate, and enact their roles within the international system. At its core, Role Theory posits that foreign policy behaviour is shaped by three interrelated dimensions: national role conception, role expectations, and role performance. These elements form the analytical foundation of this study.

Role Theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing foreign policy behavior by bridging material capabilities and the subjective interpretations of decision makers. Rather than treating states as unitary actors responding mechanically to structural incentives, Role Theory emphasizes how policymakers' perceptions, values, and beliefs shape their understanding of



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what roles their state should perform in the international system (Holsti, 1970). In doing so, it provides a middle ground between structural approaches in International Relations and actor-centered perspectives in Foreign Policy Analysis.

Early role theory scholarship, most notably articulated by Holsti (1970), focused on understanding foreign policy decision-making from the viewpoint of policymakers themselves. Drawing on theatrical metaphors, Holsti conceptualized roles as socially recognized positions that actors perform on an international stage. While actors bring their own identities and interpretations to these roles, they are simultaneously constrained by established expectations, institutional settings, and systemic structures. In this sense, role performance reflects both agency and constraint. As Holsti (1970, p. 243) argued, foreign policy behavior derives primarily from policymakers' role conceptions, domestic needs and demands, and critical events or trends in the external environment.

Subsequent scholarship refined this perspective by highlighting the socially constructed and interactive nature of roles. While early role theory maintained close ties to structural theories of International Relations by emphasizing systemic constraints (for example Walker, 1979; Wish, 1980), later contributions—particularly after the end of the Cold War—re-centered attention on decision makers as motivated agents operating within, but not determined by, domestic and international structures (for example Hudson, 2005; Kaarbo, 2003). This shift underscored that roles are not merely imposed by the system but are interpreted, negotiated, and occasionally contested through political practice.

At the core of Role Theory lies the concept of national role conception, defined as policymakers' internalized understandings of the functions and responsibilities their state should fulfill in international affairs. Holsti (1970, pp. 245–246) described national role conceptions as policymakers' “image” of the appropriate orientations, commitments, and actions suitable for their state within the international system or a subordinate regional order. These role conceptions are shaped by historical narratives, domestic political priorities, and external pressures, and they serve as cognitive roadmaps guiding foreign policy choices.

Roles, however, are not enacted in isolation. Role expectations refer to the norms, assumptions, and demands held by domestic constituencies and external actors regarding how a state should behave, given its perceived identity, capabilities, and status (Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012). As Thies and Sari (2018) emphasize, roles are socially recognized positions within an



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organized group, meaning that states must continuously locate themselves within a web of expectations held by others. This process of role location involves aligning internal role conceptions with external expectations, institutional opportunities, and systemic constraints.

The interaction between role conceptions and role expectations becomes observable through role enactment, or role performance. Role enactment encompasses the concrete decisions, policies, and diplomatic practices through which states attempt to perform their preferred roles (Holsti, 1970). It is at this stage that discrepancies between how a state sees itself and how it is perceived by others may emerge, revealing tensions embedded in foreign policy behavior.

Because states often enact multiple roles simultaneously, role theory also draws attention to role conflict and role strain. Holsti (1970) noted that states frequently adopt multiple roles due to their diverse regional and global relationships, a tendency particularly pronounced among major and emerging powers. Role conflict arises when the expectations associated with different roles are incompatible, or when external actors contest a state's preferred role performance. In such situations, states engage in role negotiation, adjusting, prioritizing, or redefining roles in response to domestic debates and international feedback. In this study, Role Theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing Indonesia's BRICS membership by examining the interaction between Indonesia's evolving role conceptions, the expectations imposed by ASEAN partners, Western states, and BRICS members, and the resulting role conflicts that emerge from these competing demands. By focusing on role articulation, enactment, and negotiation, the framework enables an assessment of whether Indonesia's BRICS engagement represents continuity within its free and active foreign policy tradition or a broader recalibration of its international identity amid contested multilateralism. To contextualize Role Theory within the case of Indonesia's accession to BRICS, this article draws on established role typologies in Indonesia's foreign policy scholarship while adapting them to the specific dynamics of contemporary multilateralism. Previous studies have identified a set of relatively stable national role conceptions that have shaped Indonesia's external behavior, including regional leadership, non-alignment, mediation, and normative advocacy (Borchers, 2013; Rüland, 2017). More recent scholarship highlights Indonesia's growing ambition to reposition itself as an emerging middle power with global interests,



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particularly through roles such as bridge builder and voice of the Global South (Karim, 2018, 2021, 2023a).

In the context of BRICS membership, this study focuses on three interrelated role conceptions that are most salient to Indonesia's current foreign policy discourse that have been identified by previous scholars such as Rüland and Karim. First, the role of bridge builder reflects Indonesia's self-image as an intermediary capable of engaging diverse political and economic groupings without exclusive alignment. This role is operationalized through official narratives framing BRICS as complementary rather than oppositional to Western-led institutions, Indonesia's continued participation in forums such as the G20, and explicit rejection of bloc politics by foreign policy elites. Second, the role of voice of the Global South captures Indonesia's aspiration to represent developing countries in global governance debates. Empirically, this role is observable in rhetoric emphasizing development, equity, and reform of international institutions, as well as claims that BRICS offers an additional platform for advancing Global South interests.

Third, the role of regional leader within ASEAN remains central to Indonesia's foreign policy identity and serves as a key reference point for assessing role conflict. This role is operationalized through continued rhetorical commitment to ASEAN centrality, consultation with Southeast Asian partners, and diplomatic efforts to preserve ASEAN neutrality amid great-power competition. Tensions emerge where Indonesia's BRICS engagement is perceived—by either regional or external actors—as potentially undermining this leadership role.



**Table 1. Core Role Conceptions in Indonesia's Foreign Policy and Their Relevance to BRICS**

Role Conception	Historical Roots	Implementation (Key Cases / Institutions)	Relevance to BRICS Membership
<b>Anti-Colonialism/ Non-Aligned/ a Voice of Global South</b>	Sukarno era; Bandung Conference (1955) Anti-colonial legacy; Reformasi-era global outreach	Non-Aligned Movement; South-South cooperation; advocacy for development reform; G20 presidency (2022)	Framing BRICS as non-exclusive and compatible with Free and Active doctrine; BRICS as platform to amplify Global South representation and status
<b>Bridge Builder / Mediator</b>	Post-Cold War diplomacy	Mediation in Cambodia, Mindanao; leadership in G20;	Justification for joining BRICS while maintaining ties with Western-led institutions
<b>Regional Leader (ASEAN Centrality)</b>	New Order consolidation; post-1998 diplomacy	ASEAN leadership; ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific; mediation in Southeast Asia	Tension between BRICS engagement and ASEAN neutrality expectations

Table 1 illustrates how Indonesia's BRICS membership can be situated within a longer trajectory of national role conceptions. Rather than constituting an abrupt foreign policy shift, BRICS accession reflects the selective activation and recombination of established roles—particularly Indonesia's self-image as an independent actor, bridge builder, and Global South representative. At the same time, the table highlights potential tensions, especially where



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BRICS engagement intersects with Indonesia's long-standing commitment to ASEAN centrality.

Role conflict is identified where discrepancies arise between Indonesia's self-conceptions and the expectations of external actors, including ASEAN partners, Western states, and BRICS members themselves (Karim, 2023b). Particular attention is paid to conflicts between Indonesia's bridge-builder narrative and external perceptions of BRICS as a revisionist bloc, as well as tensions between Global South advocacy and Indonesia's post-1998 identity as a democratic and normative actor. These conflicts can be examined through elite discourse, policy debates, and reactions from international partners.

By operationalizing these role conceptions and conflicts, this article situates Indonesia's BRICS membership within a broader process of role negotiation in a fragmented global order. Rather than interpreting accession as a binary choice between alignment and non-alignment, the analysis demonstrates how Indonesia seeks to reconcile multiple, and at times competing, roles as it navigates contested multilateralism. Indonesia's BRICS engagement reflects an evolving emerging middle power role conception. While Indonesia's material capabilities remain those of a medium power, political elites increasingly articulate global ambitions that transcend regional leadership (Wicaksana, 2022). This role is operationalized through symbolic positioning—such as active participation in high-profile summits, pursuit of membership in multiple global institutions, and elite discourse highlighting Indonesia's global relevance and responsibility. BRICS membership thus functions not only as a policy choice but also as a status-enhancing strategy aimed at reinforcing Indonesia's international visibility.

## **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze Indonesia's decision to pursue full membership in BRICS through the analytical lens of Role Theory. The analysis is grounded in core Role Theory concepts—national role conceptions, role enactment, and role conflict. Drawing on Holsti (1970) and Indonesia's literatures on roles (Borchers, 2013; Karim, 2018, 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Rüland, 2017). The study operationalizes three historically salient



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Indonesian role conceptions: (1) non-aligned and independent actor, voice of the Global South (2) bridge builder between competing power blocs, and (3) ASEAN regional leader. These roles function as analytical categories guiding empirical inquiry. Empirical data are traced through presidential and official foreign policy statements, and government documents related to Indonesia's BRICS engagement and supplemented by secondary materials such as academic studies, policy reports, and reputable media coverage. By foregrounding role negotiation rather than policy outcomes, the methodology enables a nuanced reading of Indonesia's BRICS membership as an evolving practice of positioning within contested multilateralism in the increasingly polarized world.

## **Finding and Discussion**

### **1. BRICS as a Strategic Role Arena for Indonesia**

BRICS was originally established in 2009 as a forum for cooperation among major emerging economies—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—before South Africa formally joined in 2011. Initially conceived as a loose coalition aimed at coordinating economic interests and enhancing bargaining power within global financial institutions, BRICS has since evolved into a broader political platform seeking to amplify the collective voice of developing countries in global governance reform (Gabuev & Stuenkel, 2024; Stuenkel, 2020, 2024). Its evolution reflects wider transformations in the international system, marked by dissatisfaction with Western-centric institutional arrangements and growing demands from the Global South for greater representation and autonomy.

The expansion of BRICS in 2024 to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia marked a qualitative shift in the grouping's political ambition. Rather than merely enlarging membership, the expansion signalled an effort to increase BRICS' geopolitical reach, demographic representativeness, and symbolic authority as a Global South coalition (BBC.com, 2024). As Chinese President Xi Jinping noted in the context of BRICS enlargement, expansion was intended to 'inject new vitality into BRICS cooperation mechanism' (Wang & Lee, 2023). Indonesia's accession in January 2025 further extended this logic by bringing Southeast Asia—long absent from BRICS—into the grouping's strategic calculus (Jash, 2025). With eleven full members and a growing number of partner countries,



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BRICS has increasingly positioned itself as an alternative—though not unified—pole within a fragmented global order.

The material foundations of BRICS' appeal are significant. Collectively, BRICS members and partners account for more than 41 per cent of global GDP measured by purchasing power parity, exceeding the combined share of the G7, while representing over 40 per cent of the world's population (Feingold, 2024; Norton, 2025). China and India alone contribute a substantial portion of this economic weight, underscoring the bloc's demographic and production-based influence. Beyond aggregate indicators, BRICS has also sought to institutionalise its reformist ambitions through the creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), both designed to provide alternatives to Western-dominated financial mechanisms such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Stuenkel, 2020). Although their practical impact remains uneven, these institutions serve an important symbolic function by signalling dissatisfaction with existing hierarchies in global economic governance.

Over time, BRICS has expanded well beyond its original economic mandate. The grouping now operates through a dense network of functional cooperation mechanisms, including sector-specific working groups and regular meetings among senior officials, ministers, and heads of state. Cooperation spans a wide range of issue areas, including finance, trade, health, education, science and technology, agriculture, labour, communications, social protection, and digital governance. More recently, BRICS has also extended its activities into areas such as cybersecurity, space cooperation, cultural exchange, and think tank networks, reflecting its ambition to shape norms across multiple domains of global governance (Stuenkel, 2024). This breadth of engagement reinforces BRICS' appeal as a flexible and multifunctional platform for emerging powers.

For Indonesia, however, the strategic importance of BRICS cannot be reduced to material incentives alone. Indonesia already participates in—and often benefits from—other major multilateral platforms, including ASEAN, the G20 and regional economic frameworks such as RCEP (Damuri & Friawan, 2023). What distinguishes BRICS is not superior economic returns, but the distinct role opportunities it offers within the international system.



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ASEAN remains central to Indonesia's regional leadership, yet its consensus-based institutional design limits its capacity to project collective influence on global issues beyond Southeast Asia. The G20, by contrast, provides Indonesia with access to global economic governance but operates within normative and institutional parameters largely shaped by established Western powers (Sebastian & Guild, 2023). BRICS occupies a different institutional and symbolic space. Its informal structure, absence of legally binding commitments, and emphasis on Global South solidarity allow Indonesia to perform a more autonomous and expressive foreign policy role without the constraints associated with formal alignment (Duggan et al., 2022).

a role-theoretical perspective, BRICS provides Indonesia with a role-elevating arena (Jash, 2025; Lee et al., 2025). Participation enables Indonesian foreign policy elites to enact long-standing national role conceptions—particularly those of bridge builder and voice of the Global South—on a more prominent global stage. Within BRICS, Indonesia is not merely a regional representative of Southeast Asia but a peer among leading emerging powers. This status differentiation matters symbolically, reinforcing Indonesia's self-image as a middle power with global interests rather than a peripheral actor in Western-led institutions (Karim, 2023a). Moreover, BRICS offers Indonesia an alternative diplomatic audience. Engagement within BRICS allows Indonesia to diversify its strategic partnerships and signal independence in an increasingly polarised international environment (Fraser & Saha, 2025). By participating in a forum that includes both revisionist and status-quo powers, Indonesia can project strategic ambiguity—an enduring feature of its *bebas dan aktif* foreign policy—while avoiding overt alignment with any single bloc. In this sense, BRICS enhances Indonesia's capacity for role performance across multiple audiences, including the Global South, major emerging economies, and established powers.

At the same time, Indonesia's BRICS membership introduces significant role tensions. While the grouping facilitates Indonesia's aspiration to act as a Global South leader, it also complicates its established roles within ASEAN and its partnerships with Western democracies (Fitriani, 2025; Iannone, 2025). ASEAN centrality has long been a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy identity, underpinning its claims to regional leadership and diplomatic legitimacy. Deeper engagement with BRICS risks diluting this focus, particularly if Indonesia



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is perceived as prioritising extra-regional platforms over Southeast Asian institutional cohesion. Externally, BRICS membership may generate expectations—particularly from Western actors—that Indonesia is drifting toward alignment with revisionist powers such as China and Russia (Mai, 2025). Such perceptions risk undermining Indonesia's image as an independent and normatively moderate actor, potentially complicating cooperation with the United States and the European Union on issues ranging from trade to democracy promotion (Negara & Suryadinata, 2025).

These tensions underscore that BRICS is not simply a strategic opportunity but a site of ongoing role negotiation. Indonesia's challenge lies in leveraging BRICS to amplify its international standing while maintaining consistency across its multiple role commitments (Shibata, 2025). Whether BRICS membership ultimately reinforces or destabilises Indonesia's foreign policy identity depends on how successfully Indonesian elites manage these competing expectations over time. As such, Indonesia's accession to BRICS represents a critical test of its capacity to balance role expansion with role coherence amid contested multilateralism.

## **2. Indonesia's Role Conceptions within BRICS: Bridge Builder and Voice of the Global South**

In role-theoretical terms, Indonesia's entry into BRICS represents a deliberate act of role enactment, whereby long-standing role conceptions are projected onto a new and more influential multilateral stage. Indonesia has officially framed its accession to BRICS as a strategic extension of its long-standing foreign policy identity, particularly its aspiration to act as a bridge builder and a leading voice of the Global South. This section examines how Indonesia seeks to perform these two interrelated roles within BRICS.

### **Indonesia as a Bridge Builder**

Indonesia's aspiration to function as a bridge builder lies at the core of its contemporary foreign policy identity. Rooted in the doctrine of *bebas dan aktif* (free and active), this role conception emphasises strategic autonomy, non-alignment with power blocs, and proactive engagement in fostering dialogue among diverse international actors (Borchers, 2013; Rüland,



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2017). Under President Prabowo Subianto, this role has been reasserted with renewed emphasis, particularly in the context of Indonesia's participation in BRICS.

As a bridge builder, as Indonesia's foreign policy elites have claimed, BRICS membership does not signal an ideological alignment against the West, but rather reflects an effort to position Indonesia as a stabilising intermediary in a fragmented global order. Foreign Minister Sugiono has explicitly linked Indonesia's BRICS membership to this bridge-building function, stating that 'as a BRICS member, Indonesia wants to become a bridge-builder for the interests of developing economies and the Indo-Pacific nations' (Shofa, 2023), while remaining committed to preventing further escalation of geo-economic and geopolitical rivalry. At the BRICS Summit in Brazil July 2025, President Prabowo clearly voiced Indonesia's stance and position as a bridge builder in various global issues and collective efforts amid growing global uncertainties (Antaranews, 2025a; Kementerian Luar Negeri RI, 2025; Raditio, 2025). Further, Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono asserts 'as a country that is part of the Global South and a member of the G20, Indonesia will utilize the BRICS forum as a platform to advocate for fairer and more inclusive global cooperation, as well as to advance national interests in various fields including economics, finance, education, and technology' (Rahayu, 2025). President Prabowo himself has repeatedly articulated a diplomatic vision centred on inclusivity and universal friendship. In one of his earliest foreign policy statements after taking office, he emphasised Indonesia's intention to maintain amicable relations with all major powers, invoking the adage that 'a thousand friends are too few, one enemy is too many' (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary, 2024). Hence, Indonesia claims that this role is projected to prevent BRICS from becoming a rival force that further intensifies the divide between the North and South nations.

From a role-theoretical perspective, Indonesia's role conception as a bridge builder constitutes an exercise in role location. By joining a grouping often perceived as a counterweight to Western-led institutions, Indonesia seeks to reinterpret BRICS not as an oppositional bloc, but as a dialogical space in which it can mediate between competing geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Indonesian policymakers have consistently rejected the notion that engagement with BRICS undermines relations with Western partners. As Prabowo stated, 'Indonesia sees BRICS as a very strong pillar of stability and hope in the



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current international geopolitical landscape.... We must continue working more closely together. We must consult with one another' (*Prabowo: BRICS a Pillar of Stability Amid Global Turmoil*, 2025) This message affirms that Indonesia has no intention of distancing itself from the West, either gradually or abruptly. Instead, it seeks to broaden its diplomatic engagement across multiple institutional platforms (Rahn, 2025). This role location also manifested of what Indonesian scholar, Fitriani characterises Indonesia's approach in BRICS as a continuation of its long-standing strategy of multi-alignment rather than a foreign policy pivot (Fitriani, 2025).

Indonesia's bridge-building role is further reinforced by its simultaneous engagement in a diverse array of international forums. Under Prabowo, Indonesia has reaffirmed its commitment to ASEAN centrality, intensified its pursuit of OECD membership—with an ambitious target of accession within three years—and deepened its participation in Indo-Pacific minilateral arrangements (Antaranews, 2025b). Notably, Indonesia has strengthened cooperation with India, a founding BRICS member, through initiatives such as the Australia–India–Indonesia trilateral dialogue. A joint statement by President Prabowo and Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted this trilateral framework as evidence of Indonesia's expanding role in Indo-Pacific security and economic governance (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2025) It is therefore, within BRICS, Indonesia seeks to perform its bridge-building role not as a passive participant, but as an active architect of dialogue—leveraging its middle-power status, diplomatic credibility, and non-aligned identity to foster cooperation among heterogeneous members with divergent strategic interests.

### **Indonesia as a Voice of the Global South**

Alongside its bridge-building role, Indonesia has articulated an increasingly assertive ambition to act as a leading voice of the Global South. Indonesia's accession to BRICS has been officially framed by Indonesian 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



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traditional role as a regional leader in Southeast Asia, positioning it instead as a connector between developed and developing nations (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary, 2025). At the BRICS Summit in Brazil, Prabowo has stressed Indonesia's advocacy for a more equitable global governance system, one that better represents the interests of the Global South and emphasised the need for a more inclusive and representative global governance architecture, arguing that existing institutions inadequately reflect the interests and aspirations of developing countries (Antaranews, 2025c; Kantor President RI, 2025)

While the path is fraught with complexity, according to an Indonesian senior diplomat, Indonesia's pursuit of BRICS is a clear signal of its intent to pursue 'strategic adaptation', which also it reflects 'confidence. Indonesia's posture as a democratic middle power enables it to engage with all partners without losing its direction' (Ruddyard, 2025). In this sense, Indonesia's BRICS membership signals an ambition to transition from regional leadership to global role elevation, aligning with Karim's (2023a) observation that Indonesian elites increasingly frame the country as "a regional power with global interests and concerns."

Indonesia's claim to Global South leadership is deeply rooted in its historical legacy. The 1955 Bandung Conference, hosted by Indonesia, laid the foundations for the Non-Aligned Movement and established principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence that continue to resonate within Global South diplomacy. As former Chilean ambassador Jorge Heine argues, this historical legacy endows Indonesia with a unique moral authority and symbolic capital within the Global South (Heine, 2025). Indonesian officials frequently invoke Bandung as a point of reference, reinforcing the narrative continuity between Indonesia's past leadership and its contemporary ambitions within BRICS (Tananal, 2025).

Indonesia's accession has also been welcomed by other BRICS members as strengthening the grouping's claim to represent the Global South. As the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs echoed this sentiment upon announcing Indonesia's acceptance into BRICS:

The Brazilian government welcomes Indonesia for its entry into BRICS. As the largest economy and most populous nation in Southeast Asia, Indonesia shares with other BRICS members the support for the reform of the global governance institutions and



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contributes significantly to the deepening of Global South cooperation, priorities that align with Brazil's theme for its presidency: "Enhancing Global South Cooperation for a More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance" (Brazil Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2025).

At the same time, Indonesia's Global South leadership role is not without constraints. BRICS itself is internally diverse, encompassing democracies and authoritarian regimes, commodity exporters and industrialising economies, and states with divergent geopolitical orientations (Patrick et al., 2025). Enacting a coherent Global South leadership role within such a heterogeneous grouping requires careful navigation to avoid being subsumed by dominant members, particularly China (Naidu, 2025). Indonesia's challenge, hence, lies in asserting normative leadership—centred on inclusivity, development, and autonomy—without being perceived as endorsing the more revisionist agendas of certain BRICS members.

Taken together, Indonesia's bridge-building and Global South leadership roles illustrate the complexity of role location within BRICS. While these roles are mutually reinforcing in principle, they also generate tensions in practice. Acting as a Global South advocate within a grouping often perceived as anti-Western may undermine Indonesia's credibility as a neutral bridge builder. Conversely, excessive emphasis on mediation and inclusivity may dilute Indonesia's capacity to articulate a distinctive leadership voice within the Global South.

These tensions highlight that Indonesia's BRICS membership is not a settled foreign policy outcome, but an ongoing process of role negotiation. Whether Indonesia can sustain its dual role performance will depend on its ability to manage competing expectations from ASEAN partners, Western democracies, and fellow BRICS members. As such, Indonesia's engagement with BRICS serves as a critical test of its capacity to reconcile role expansion with role coherence in an increasingly contested international order.

## **Role Conflict in Indonesia's BRICS Engagement: Navigating Competing Expectations**

This section examines the key sources of role conflict in Indonesia's BRICS engagement, showing how Indonesia's multiple role commitments interact, sometimes at



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cross-purposes, and how this complicates foreign policy coherence. Role conflict is not simply a matter of rhetorical inconsistency, but arises when role expectations from different institutional arenas, constituencies, and external parties demand divergent behaviors. Role Theory, as outlined earlier, posits that role performance becomes contested when internal role conceptions confront external expectations or when different roles impose conflicting demands (Holsti, 1970; Cantir & Kaarbo, 2012; Thies & Sari, 2018). For Indonesia, three main clusters of role conflict emerge in the context of BRICS: first, ASEAN leadership versus extra-regional activism. Indonesia's foundational foreign policy identity has long been anchored in regional leadership through ASEAN centrality. Since the New Order era and particularly after the Reformasi period, Indonesia has positioned itself as *primus inter pares* within Southeast Asia, consistently advocating for ASEAN's centrality in managing regional security, economic integration, and normative frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Anwar, 1997, 2020). This role represents a core component of Indonesia's self-conception: the state that holds ASEAN together and projects regional stability.

However, Indonesia's engagement with BRICS introduces tensions with this regional role. ASEAN operates on a consensus model that privileges internal cohesion and neutrality amid great-power competition. In contrast, BRICS is an extra-regional coalition with varied geopolitical orientations but widely perceived—especially by Western actors—as a counter-hegemonic formation. This perception complicates Indonesia's effort to assert ASEAN leadership without appearing to privilege extra-regional platforms over intra-regional institutions. Paradoxically, the enlargement of BRICS raises the possibility of it becoming a soft-power platform, where the inclusion of Global South members obscures entrenched hierarchies. For ASEAN members, including Indonesia, this means that even with their strategic weight, member states could be sidelined into ornamental roles, celebrated for their presence but excluded from meaningful influence (Iannone, 2025).

The Indonesian government has sought to manage this tension by framing its BRICS involvement as complementary rather than substitutive. In official statements, Foreign Minister Sugiono reiterated that Indonesia's engagement with BRICS would not undermine its commitment to ASEAN centrality and unity (Debora, 2025). However, critics argue that such rhetorical assurances have done little to ease concerns. In December 2024, Sugiono chose to



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accompany President Prabowo to Cairo for the Developing Eight (D-8) Summit instead of attending the informal ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in Bangkok (Editorial, 2024). His subsequent Annual Press Statement reinforced these anxieties, as ASEAN was mentioned only in passing and no new initiatives, commitments, or leadership agendas were articulated regarding Indonesia's role in the regional organization. As an analyst lambasts 'In his haste to portray himself as a global leader, Prabowo seems to be abdicating from Indonesia's regional leadership' (Sulaiman, 2025).

Another source of role conflict arises from the tension between Indonesia's Global South advocacy and expectations tied to democratic partnerships. Indonesia has long championed normative values associated with democratic governance, human rights, and rule-based multilateralism. Particularly in the post-1998 Reformasi era, Indonesian diplomacy has emphasised democratic identity as an integral component of its foreign policy repertoire (for example Acharya, 2014; Emmers, 2021). BRICS membership, however, draws Indonesia into a coalition that includes states with varying, and at times divergent, governance norms. While BRICS collectively endorses reform of global governance structures and greater inclusion of developing countries' perspectives, its members exhibit a wide range of political systems—from India's procedural democracy to Russia's managed democracy and China's one-party governance model (Patrick et al., 2025).

This diversity has created dilemmas for Indonesian policymakers, how to maintain commitments to democratic norms while participating in a grouping that does not foreground liberal democratic values. The Indonesian leadership has responded by emphasising the peculiarly inclusive and non-aligned character of BRICS, arguing that participation does not equate to ideological endorsement. Foreign Minister Sugiono, in his annual press statement 2026 has reiterated Indonesia's active participation in BRICS, G20, APEC, MIKTA, OECD, and other platforms aims to bridge interests' and to achieve national resilience that is built by maintaining a consistent presence in these arenas with clear principles and direction. In this sense, Indonesia's support for democratic values in parallel diplomatic fora, such as ASEAN and the G20, framing BRICS as complementary rather than contradictory to these commitments. Nonetheless, the co-existence of divergent governance models within BRICS complicates Indonesia's effort to perform a consistent normative role. Balancing Global South



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solidarity with democratic advocacy remains a delicate diplomatic task, with potential implications for Indonesia's image among Western democracies and global civil society networks.

A third and deeply rooted tension concerns the bridge-building role's vulnerability to external perceptions of bloc alignment. Indonesia's intention to use its BRICS membership to mediate between competing geopolitical blocs aligns with its long-standing *bebas dan aktif* doctrine. Yet, perceptions matter: if external actors—especially in the West—interpret Indonesia's engagement with BRICS as a sign of alignment with anti-Western powers, the bridge-builder identity is undermined.

Reports from Western news sources suggest that BRICS should not be seen as an outright adversary of the West. Indonesia, echoing the stance of founding member India, continues to cultivate positive relations with Western powers and is expected to avoid taking a firm position in the rivalry between Washington and its challengers (Rahn, 2025). Indonesian officials have emphasised continuity with existing partnerships, reaffirming cooperation with Western states in other multilateral forums, and portraying BRICS as a dialogical space rather than a bloc. Notably, Indonesian diplomatic communiqués repeatedly stress that BRICS membership does not replace Indonesia's commitment to the United Nations, the G20, or bilateral strategic partnerships. However, the joint statement issued by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in 2024 suggested a different trajectory, as both leaders pledged to enhance defence and security cooperation. Moreover, Indonesia appeared to implicitly endorse China's maximalist positions on sensitive strategic issues such as Taiwan and Xinjiang, which could be interpreted as signaling a gradual move toward strategic alignment with Beijing (Laksmana, 2025).

Indonesia's decision to pursue full membership in BRICS underscores its ambition to act as a global bridge builder and a prominent voice of the Global South. Yet this global orientation carries the risk of eroding Indonesia's long-standing leadership within ASEAN. The real challenge, therefore, is the delicate task of balancing and negotiating the competing expectations that arise from both regional and global arenas. Unless Indonesia can reconcile its broader aspirations with its regional commitments, the bridges it seeks to construct may instead



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expose fractures—undermining both its credibility in ASEAN and its claim to middle-power leadership on the world stage.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined Indonesia's accession to BRICS through the lens of Role Theory, arguing that the move represents not a geopolitical realignment but a strategic effort to amplify established foreign policy roles within a fragmented international order. By analysing Indonesia's role conceptions, external expectations, and emerging conflicts, the study illustrates how a middle power navigates expanding multilateral options while seeking autonomy, credibility, and regional leadership.

Empirically, Indonesia's BRICS membership reflects continuity rather than rupture. Rather than abandoning its free and active doctrine or ASEAN centrality, Indonesia has incorporated BRICS into an already dense institutional portfolio that includes ASEAN-led mechanisms, the G20, the OECD accession process, and Indo-Pacific multilateral arrangements. BRICS thus functions as an additional arena for diplomatic performance, complicating interpretations that frame its expansion as evidence of bloc politics or binary alignment.

Indonesia's behavior underscores the growing importance of institutional diversification in an era of power diffusion. By joining BRICS while maintaining engagement with Western and Indo-Pacific partners, Indonesia demonstrates how middle powers pursue influence through role multiplicity across overlapping forums. Yet this strategy also exposes tensions: Indonesia's aspiration to act as a bridge builder within BRICS intersects with its self-image as ASEAN's leader, generating conflicts with ASEAN norms and Western expectations.

Membership nonetheless carries symbolic weight, reinforcing Indonesia's historical narrative as a Global South leader and pioneer of non-alignment. The case highlights that role conflict—between bridge builder, ASEAN leader, Global South advocate, and promoter of democratic norms—is a structural condition for middle powers. Indonesia has sought to manage these tensions through ambiguity, compartmentalization, and selective engagement, suggesting that effectiveness depends more on adaptability than on strict role consistency.



Taken together, Indonesia's accession to BRICS is best understood as a strategic experiment in role performance, revealing how emerging powers seek relevance and influence amid uncertainty without binding themselves to rigid blocs. By foregrounding role negotiation rather than alignment, this article demonstrates the continued analytical value of Role Theory for interpreting contemporary international politics. These findings contribute to broader debates on middle-power agency and the evolution of multilateralism. Finally, as this study concentrates on the initial phase of Indonesia's BRICS engagement, future longitudinal research across multiple summits, institutional initiatives, and policy domains will be essential to assess whether the observed role tensions persist, intensify, or stabilize over time.

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