

Voting Cohesion of the BRICS Countries in the UN General Assembly, 2006–2014: A BRICS Too Far?



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*In July 2014 during the sixth BRICS summit, the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa launched the Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan, suggesting a further intensification and institutionalization of their cooperation in the field of foreign policy, including within the framework of the United Nations. This article examines the extent to which the intensification of BRICS cooperation in the field of foreign policy is reflected in their voting patterns in the UN General Assembly. It presents an original dataset of the degree of voting cohesion among the five BRICS countries. It demonstrates that, overall, there is no significant increase in the degree of voting cohesion since the start of the consultations in the BRIC framework in 2006. **Keywords:** BRICS, United Nations, UN General Assembly, emerging powers, voting cohesion, multilateralism.*

OVER THE PAST DECADE THE (RE)EMERGING POWERS BRAZIL, RUSSIA, INDIA, China, and South Africa (BRICS) have gained greater influence in economic and political matters in world politics. Since 2006, they have also gradually developed and intensified a process of political dialogue and cooperation on various political, diplomatic, and bureaucratic levels—first within the Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) format,¹ and from 2011 onward in the BRICS format.² The inclusion of South Africa³ in the BRICS in 2011 was paralleled by an intensification of the BRICS dialogue and cooperation. This intensification was also mirrored in the past couple of years in the widening range of topics that were covered, in the growing level of specificity of the BRICS declarations, and in the institutionalization of cooperation in several policy fields, with the creation of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserves Arrangement (CRA) in 2014 being the most visible achievements.⁴

In this article, we assess the extent to which the intensification of the cooperation in the BRICS framework is also reflected in their voting patterns in the UN General Assembly. Our aim was to analyze the degree of voting cohesion among the BRICS in the General Assembly in general and in its various main committees in the period 2006–2014. The dual choice to analyze the evolution since 2006 and to focus on the voting behavior in the Gen-

eral Assembly is not fortuitous, as it was in 2006 in the margins of the Sixty-first General Assembly that the ministers of foreign affairs of Brazil, Russia, India, and China met for the first time in the BRIC format and started their political dialogue, which provides an appropriate starting point to assess the evolution in their voting cohesion. This leads to the following hypothesis that we tested in this article: a stronger voting cohesion between the BRICS at the General Assembly resulted from the start of the BRIC consultation in 2006 and from the intensification of the BRICS interaction from 2011 onward in particular.

By answering the question of to what extent the intensification of the BRICS dialogue in the field of foreign policy is reflected in their voting behavior at the General Assembly, we aim to contribute to the academic discussion about the cohesiveness of emerging powers.⁵ Peter Ferdinand has conducted the most recent extensive research by analyzing the voting behavior of the BRICS countries in the General Assembly from 1974 to 2011. Comparing the aggregated results of the voting cohesion in six time periods (1974–1979, 1980–1989, 1990–1993, 1994–1999, 2000–2008, 2009–2011), Ferdinand concludes that there is “a high and now growing degree of cohesion among BRICS,” with nuclear issues and human rights remaining two areas that reveal persisting divergences based on possession/nonpossession of nuclear weapons, differing continental perspectives, and diverse political values and systems.⁶ However, his conclusions are based on the aggregated results of the voting behavior in these time periods, with the aggregated data for the periods 2000–2008 and 2009–2011 not allowing for a more detailed evaluation of the BRICS voting cohesion and of the potential effects of the intensification of the BRICS dialogue since 2011.

Our research focused on the period 2006–2014 and assessed each annual General Assembly session of that period, from the Sixty-first General Assembly session up to the Sixty-eighth General Assembly session that was held in 2013–2014. Our research thus covers the period in which the BRIC(S) cooperation was intensified, which allowed us to examine whether a growing degree of cohesion can be detected in this period. We not only analyzed the evolution of the BRICS voting cohesion in the General Assembly in general, but also assessed the voting cohesion at the General Assembly main committee level to obtain deeper insight into the level and substance of the voting cohesion.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, we discuss the development of the BRICS framework and the claims regarding the intensification of interactions among the BRICS. We follow this with a methodological section on measuring voting cohesion and a section on the functioning of the General Assembly. This provides the foundation for our analysis of the voting behavior and cohesion of the BRICS countries: On which issues is there consensus and to what extent do they cast common votes?

The Intensification of the BRICS Interaction

The collected data contribute to the debate on the rise of and interaction between the BRICS countries, which has been going on for over a decade. This debate started in 2001, when Goldman Sachs's Jim O'Neill coined the acronym "BRIC" to focus on the potential of the economies of emerging countries Brazil, Russia, India, and China.⁷ In 2006, five years after the launch of the BRIC acronym, the four countries started a process of political dialogue when, in the margins of the Sixty-first General Assembly, their ministers of foreign affairs met for the first time. Cooperation in the BRIC format was further strengthened from mid-2008 onward with meetings of their ministers, including those of foreign affairs, finance, agriculture, and health. Eventually, the BRICS leaders started meeting on a regular basis, with an annual BRIC summit meeting being organized from 2009 onward, starting with the summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia.⁸

Another BRIC breakthrough was reached in December 2010 when South Africa was granted access to this elite group, which by early 2011 was transformed from BRIC into BRICS. The year 2011 was also unique for the BRICS for another reason: during that year all five BRICS members were part of the UN Security Council (Russia and China as permanent members; India, Brazil, and South Africa as nonpermanent members).

In 2014, during the sixth annual BRICS leaders meeting in Brazil, another BRICS milestone was reached with the signing of an agreement establishing the NDB and the treaty for the establishment of the BRICS CRA, with the seventh BRICS summit held in Ufa in 2015 marking their entry into force. The NDB and the CRA can be seen as the first BRICS institutions, and they aim to be an alternative to the Western-dominated international financial institutions (IFIs), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁹

During the same meeting in 2014 the BRICS leaders adopted the Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan, which reflected a further expansion, intensification, and institutionalization of consultation and cooperation in the field of foreign policy, including within the UN framework.¹⁰ Whereas the Sanya Declaration and Action Plan of 2011 had already confirmed the practice that the ministers of foreign affairs meet during the General Assembly sessions and that their "representatives to international organizations based in New York and Geneva meet periodically in an informal manner,"¹¹ the latter was further specified in the 2012 Delhi Action Plan that speaks of "consultations amongst BRICS Permanent Missions in New York, Vienna and Geneva, as required."¹²

The tendency toward a further expansion and intensification of their foreign policy cooperation and coordination with regard to the UN is also visible when comparing in more detail the content of the BRICS joint statements and action plans adopted after the annual BRICS summit meetings. These declarations not only have become longer and more detailed, but also increasingly have included the positions of the BRICS countries with regard to specific for-

eign policy issues where the UN is involved. The short declaration after the first BRICS summit merely expresses the “strong commitment to multilateral diplomacy with the UN playing the central role in dealing with global challenges and threats,” refers to the need for a comprehensive reform of the UN, and notes that negotiations are going on in the UN about a draft Comprehensive Convention Against International Terrorism.¹³

The Sanya Declaration adopted two years later contained a limited number of rather general paragraphs on the UN, including this time also the BRICS concern about “the turbulence in the Middle East, the North African and West African regions”; their “wish that the countries affected achieve peace, stability, prosperity and progress”; and their agreement regarding “the principle that the use of force should be avoided.” The crisis in Libya was the only one that deserved a separate paragraph, with the BRICS pointing to their “wish to continue our cooperation in the UN Security Council on Libya” and their “view that all the parties should resolve their differences through peaceful means and dialogue in which the UN and regional organizations should as appropriate play their role.”¹⁴

The subsequent declarations and action plans became gradually more specific, with the 2014 Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan containing around twenty paragraphs that indicate the BRICS position on crises and negotiations that are discussed in the UN or where the UN is involved, including a range of conflicts and crises and more horizontal themes.¹⁵ The tendency toward a further expansion and intensification of their foreign policy dialogue is also visible in the increasing number of meetings and consultations on other levels and in other settings, including meetings at senior officials and working group levels, meetings of BRICS national security advisers, consultations among BRICS permanent missions or embassies, as appropriate, in New York, Rome, Paris, Washington, Nairobi, and Geneva. The Fortaleza Action Plan also pointed to a “Foreign Policy Planning Dialogue” as one of the new areas of cooperation that was to be explored.¹⁶ Of interest in this context is the second paragraph of the Fortaleza Declaration:

In the aftermath of the first cycle of five Summits, hosted by every BRICS member, our coordination is well established in various multilateral and plurilateral initiatives and intra-BRICS cooperation is expanding to encompass new areas. Our shared views and commitment to international law and to multilateralism, with the United Nations at its center and foundation, are widely recognized and constitute a major contribution to global peace, economic stability, social inclusion, equality, sustainable development and mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries.¹⁷

This part of the declaration points to well-established coordination as well as to shared views on general principles. However, one of the problems for research on BRICS foreign policy interaction is that—with the exception of the declarations adopted after the annual summit meetings and some minis-

terial meetings—the BRICS provide little or no information about the actual outcomes of the various other interactions at the level of the ministers of foreign affairs and, particularly, at the diplomatic level.¹⁸ This is also observable in the BRICS action plans since they do not provide much detail, but refer in only general terms to meetings and consultations among the parties.

This is one of the reasons why it is useful to investigate whether this scarcely documented intensification of BRICS cooperation is at a minimum reflected in their voting patterns in the General Assembly, a question that is at the heart of this article. Fabiano Mielniczuk could indeed conclude on the basis of an analysis of these countries' statements at the General Assembly opening sessions that the character of their identities is changing and that this creates opportunities for converging interests, but the question is whether this can also be observed in their actual voting behavior.¹⁹

There are some good reasons to take a critical perspective toward the claim that the BRICS countries have managed to intensify their actual foreign policy cooperation and coordination. Notwithstanding their intensified interaction on the various political and diplomatic levels, the five countries differ substantially in terms of demographic, economic, military, and political weight as well as in terms of regional and global ambitions. These differences explain why several authors have raised doubts about the actual impact of the BRICS on foreign policy issues. Harsh V. Pant argues that the BRICS despite their best attempts “failed to leverage their growing economic might into effective diplomatic clout,” with the reason for this failure being the very structure of the group.²⁰ Christian Brüttsch and Mihaela Papa claim in a similar vein that “in the absence of clear common objectives, the BRICS abandon all but the rhetoric of coalitional behaviour” and that “unless the five emerging powers agree on a coherent strategy to harness their relative strengths, the BRICS’ geopolitical play will be defeated by their own tactical ploys.”²¹ Zaki Laïdi adds that

the BRICS form a coalition of sovereign state defenders. While they do not seek to form an anti-Western political coalition based on a counter-proposal or radically different vision of the world, they are concerned with maintaining their independence of judgment and national action in a world that is increasingly economically and socially interdependent.²²

The numerous conflicting interests, including the potential for territorial conflicts between China and India and Russia and China, further question the emergence of a true coherent and amicable BRICS bloc.

Notwithstanding their differences the BRICS found each other in their commitment to counter, according to them, the “unjust” Western-dominated multilateral world in which they are in general underrepresented. In this article, we assess whether the BRICS were able to go further than this limited common goal and whether they were able to at least translate the intensified

BRICS interaction into more coherent views on specific foreign policy issues, as reflected in the voting behavior in the General Assembly, or whether the aforementioned critical evaluations are justified.

Measuring Voting Cohesion

James A. Caporaso and Joseph Jupille describe the term “cohesion” as “the degree to which an entity is able to formulate and articulate internally consistent policy preferences.”²³ For measuring voting cohesion, this requires one to take into account the voting behavior of specific countries or parliamentarians on a specific issue or issue area. Voting cohesion therefore can be considered as “output generated by the coordination process.”²⁴

From an analytical perspective, measuring the level of voting cohesion has advantages as well as limitations. An advantage of measuring voting cohesion is that it contains reliable and available data, it shows consistency over time, it is suitable for statistical analysis, and key issues can be distinguished.²⁵ The information on voting records at the UN, as available in the UN Bibliographic Information System (UNBISNET), is not only reliable but also relatively easy to access.²⁶ An additional strength of using voting cohesion is its consistency over time. As a consequence, it is possible to compare the accessible data over a longer period of time. Besides that, voting records are useful for statistical analysis, which allows the analyst to derive the main issues or issue areas on which countries or country groups voted in a cohesive manner.

In addition to these strengths, weaknesses appear when it comes to studying voting cohesion.²⁷ The focus is on speaking with one voice rather than on the message. Moreover, voting cohesion does not touch on the process that takes place to reach a common position. What is measured by focusing on voting cohesion is the output of the voting procedure, being a yes, no, abstention, or absent. Therefore, measuring voting cohesion touches only the tip of the iceberg. It is also of limited value in case of resolutions on which almost all General Assembly states agree. In that case a high level of cohesion may be suggested between groups of states on a certain issue, but this cohesion may in fact be part of a much broader or even virtually complete consensus. Additionally, Edith Drieskens notes that the concept of voting cohesion does not have the same explanatory power for the different UN bodies, meaning that it “may be a powerful tool for measuring regional actorness at the UNGA [UN General Assembly], but not for the UNSC [UN Security Council].”²⁸

Over the past decades, multiple quantitative methods for measuring the degree of voting cohesion have been developed.²⁹ The academic literature thus lacks a consistent measure of the degree of voting cohesion among parties, with authors using different indices of voting cohesion.³⁰ This reflects the different methodological choices regarding the data collection, the resolutions that are to be included, and the question of how to deal with absenteeism and abstentions.³¹

In this study, we used a combination of two approaches to draw a picture of the extent of agreement: the statistical overview in percentage of agreement and an adapted version of Paul Luif's mathematical method.³² The overview of percentages draws a picture of the complete agreements and partial agreements as well as the complete disagreements while the mathematical method provides a distance score. We used the following criteria to determine whether complete agreement, partial agreement, or complete disagreement exists when voting on a specific General Assembly resolution.³³ Complete agreement occurs when the countries cast identical votes (either yes or no) or are all abstaining (which is given a score of 1). Partial agreement occurs when some countries voted either yes or no, but one or more of the countries abstained (score: 0.5). Complete disagreement occurs when at least two countries cast opposite votes; this means that at least one country voted for and at least one country against the General Assembly resolution (score: 0). This method leads to data about the maximum extent of agreement or disagreement between states. The actual score on agreement among countries is related to the maximum distance possible, ranging from 0 to 100: 0 refers to the maximum distance that states can have in case of only full disagreements; 100 refers to the minimum distance that will occur when there is complete agreement among the countries, which is the case when all states cast identical votes.

Although one could question whether a partial agreement is always exactly in between a complete disagreement and a complete agreement, giving a partial agreement half the score of a complete agreement is seen as reasonable by researchers dealing with measuring voting coherence.³⁴ The contribution of this article is to apply Luif's mathematical method to the BRICS voting cohesion at the General Assembly to examine whether the intensification of interactions between these countries has led to more cohesive voting in this UN body.

The General Assembly

The General Assembly is an important institutional framework when it comes to multilateralism since it is the only forum in which a high number of states meet and vote on a frequent basis on issues of concern to the international community.³⁵ It is the only institutionalized arena in international politics where nearly all states respond formally and frequently to a broad variety of resolutions concerning critical aspects of international politics.³⁶

Meetings in the General Assembly generally take place every year from September until December. Each General Assembly member has one vote, which implies that formally all states have equal representation.³⁷ Article 18 of the UN Charter states that decisions on important questions, including those on peace and security, admission of new members, and budgetary matters, require a two-thirds majority of the members present and voting. By contrast, decisions on other questions are adopted by a simple majority of the members

present and voting. Resolutions that are voted on in the General Assembly are legally nonbinding and, thus, need to be seen as recommendations. However, they still can have importance in international law.³⁸ Furthermore, since the late 1980s, the Security Council has played an increasingly central role in comparison to the General Assembly,³⁹ making the Security Council today's main UN body. Nevertheless, as Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner emphasize, the General Assembly resolutions are "a useful barometer of the collective mood of the UN's members."⁴⁰

Since the accession of South Sudan in 2011, 193 states have a seat in the General Assembly. Members are arranged in regional groups: Brazil belongs to the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC), China and India to the Asia-Pacific Group, Russia to the Eastern European Group, and South Africa to the African Group. In addition, there are also loose cooperation frameworks at the UN such as the partially overlapping Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G-77), of which several BRICS countries are members. Given the basic feature of one country, one vote, a stable coalition holding a two-thirds majority of the votes can control the General Assembly and use it to form the global discourse and to influence the course of debates. In the history of the General Assembly, two such coalitions have existed: the US-led coalition from 1947 to 1960 and the coalition of the third world since 1967. The process of decolonization mainly drove the development of this new coalition in the 1960s, with these countries representing the so-called Global South. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the North-South cleavage remained as the main divide among the UN members.⁴¹

Our focus in this article is on the General Assembly resolutions adopted with a vote.⁴² In his research on how nations vote in the General Assembly, Miguel Marin-Bosch describes a trend of a decreasing percentage of resolutions that are adopted with a vote: from 78 percent in 1950 to 44 percent in 1985.⁴³ This trend has continued in the following decades: approximately 20–30 percent of the resolutions are adopted by roll call vote, which means that in an annual General Assembly session generally between seventy and eighty resolutions are adopted with a vote. The other resolutions pass by consensus of all the General Assembly states and are thus not voted on.⁴⁴ In cases where the General Assembly resolutions are voted on, most countries vote in favor of them. To give an indication, on all votes cast in the period 1974–2008, there were 83.7 percent yes votes, 11.7 percent abstentions, and 4.6 percent no votes.⁴⁵ Consequently, casting a no vote in the General Assembly can be regarded as quite a strong statement.⁴⁶

The General Assembly is composed of six main committees that discuss policy issues in view of finding a convergence of positions of the UN states before presenting draft resolutions and decisions to a General Assembly plenary meeting.⁴⁷ Our analysis in this article focuses on the voting cohesion in only the First, Third, and Fourth Committees, as the significant number of resolutions voted on in these three committees make them suitable for a valid

analysis of their voting behavior.⁴⁸ The Disarmament and International Security Committee (First Committee) deals with questions related to disarmament and international security. Compared to the five other committees, this committee is characterized by more clashes as well as more resolutions voted on (the main line of conflict being the nuclear powers on the one hand and virtually all other countries on the other).⁴⁹

The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee (Third Committee) touches on several issues, including social development and human rights. This committee has a tradition of more votes being cast, especially on “so-called country-situation human rights resolutions where the ‘principles’ of human rights meet the geopolitical ‘realities’ of the perceived fairness or otherwise of subjecting a given country for special scrutiny.”⁵⁰ Whereas Western actors such as the European Union remain among the most vocal players in this committee, the debate is increasingly shaped by China, Russia, and the G-77 countries, with the overall level of support for the Chinese and Russian views growing significantly to the detriment of the US and European positions.⁵¹

The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) deals with a variety of subjects including decolonization and the Israeli-Palestine conflict. In this committee the conflicts in the debates move from one issue to the next, depending on which specific political conflicts are under debate.⁵² It is an intriguing committee since four BRICS countries have a colonial past. In this light, it is worthwhile recalling the previously mentioned North-South divide at the UN.

Voting Patterns of the BRICS Countries at the General Assembly

In this section, we apply the methodology discussed in the previous sections to analyze the voting patterns and the degree of cohesion of the BRICS countries in the 2006–2014 period at the General Assembly. As indicated earlier in this article, the subsequent action plans foresee that the BRICS countries’ representatives to international organizations based in New York will periodically meet informally and that there will be consultations among BRICS permanent missions in New York. We investigated whether this engagement has also translated to an increase in voting cohesion since the start of the BRICS consultation in 2006. Following an assessment of the overall BRICS cohesion in the General Assembly, we provide further insight by looking at the degree of voting cohesion at the committee level of this UN organ. We look into the issue areas on which consensus or divergence exists among these countries and assess the extent of agreement.

In general terms, it is not possible to speak about a cohesive BRICS bloc in the General Assembly in the 2006–2014 period. Table 1 shows that in that period the BRICS were in full agreement on 56.3–63.0 percent of the resolutions adopted with a vote, in partial agreement regarding 27.5–35.5 percent,

and in full disagreement regarding 6.6–13.0 percent. Even more important to answering our research question, the table shows that there is no significant increase in the degree of voting cohesion since the start of the consultations in 2006. There are more full agreements in the 2010–2011 General Assembly session than in the preceding three years, yet this is of little significance as the subsequent three sessions point to decreasing cohesion and the lowest score was reached in 2013–2014. On the positive side, from the perspective of BRICS cohesion, on average only around 10 percent of the votes cast showed a complete disagreement (implying that at least two of the five countries cast opposite votes). In the remaining number of cases, a partial agreement could be detected, implying that the BRICS countries voted either for or against a General Assembly resolution, with one or more BRICS countries abstaining (in 27.5–35.5 percent of the votes).

When it comes to the measured distance, the BRICS score is quite stable with approximately 75 in the 2006–2014 period, but with no tendency toward more cohesion being visible. The two General Assembly resolutions on the conflict in Syria adopted in the 2011–2012 plenary session provided a striking example of BRICS incohesive voting patterns, notwithstanding the reference to Syria in various BRICS joint statements and the expression of their “deep concern” on the situation in that country. The two resolutions were both adopted by a large majority of over 130 states, including Brazil, India, and South Africa, but with China and Russia casting a no vote. Syria was only one of the issues on which the BRICS countries cast opposite votes during the 2011–2012 General Assembly session, making it the session with the most complete disagreements among the BRICS countries.

Deeper insight can be gained by looking at the level of cohesion in the General Assembly’s main committees. Table 2 shows that in the Disarmament and International Security Committee complete agreement occurred in 20.0–46.7 percent of the resolutions voted on in the period 2006–2014. Moreover, as far as trends can be derived from a period of eight years, the table clearly points to a trend of decreasing agreement. Particularly remarkable was the period of 2013–2014 when the lowest level of cohesion could be noted: the BRICS cast identical votes in only 20 percent of the cases whereas the percentage of complete disagreements was at its highest with 30 percent. In absolute numbers, out of the twenty resolutions with a vote the BRICS countries were in complete agreement on only four resolutions, in complete disagreement on six resolutions, and in partial agreement on ten resolutions. This is reflected in the distance score, which lies between 45.0 and 66.7, with 2013–2014 representing the lowest score.

The main point of divergence remains related to nuclear weapons (and in particular the relationship between nuclear disarmament and nuclear nonproliferation),⁵³ which is as such not surprising as Brazil and South Africa—in contrast to China, India, and Russia—do not possess nuclear weapons. However, an analysis of the voting pattern indicates that the three BRICS countries

Table 1 Overall BRICS cohesion in the UN General Assembly (number, percentage of resolutions, and distance score)

	2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014	
	No.	%														
Resolutions with vote	86	100.0	79	100.0	76	100.0	69	100.0	73	100.0	69	100.0	72	100.0	64	100.0
Complete agreements	53	61.6	47	59.5	44	57.9	39	56.5	46	63.0	41	59.4	41	56.9	36	56.3
Partial agreements	27	31.4	24	30.4	27	35.5	24	34.8	21	28.8	19	27.5	23	31.9	21	32.8
Complete disagreements	6	7	8	10.1	5	6.6	6	8.7	6	8.2	9	13	8	11.1	7	10.9
Distance (Dmax = 0)	77.3		74.7		75.7		73.9		77.4		73.2		72.9		74.2	

Source: Authors' calculations based on unbisnet.un.org.

Note: BRICS is Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Columns may not total due to rounding.

Table 2 BRICS Cohesion in the Disarmament and International Security Committee (number, percentage of resolutions, and distance score)

	2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014	
	No.	%														
Resolutions with vote	30	100.0	26	100.0	28	100.0	21	100.0	23	100.0	20	100.0	25	100.0	20	100.0
Complete agreements	14	46.7	11	42.3	11	39.3	6	28.5	8	34.8	6	30.0	7	28.0	4	20.0
Partial agreements	12	40.0	10	38.5	14	50.0	10	47.6	12	52.2	10	50.0	12	48.0	10	50.0
Complete disagreements	4	13.3	5	19.2	3	10.7	5	23.8	3	13.0	4	20.0	6	24.0	6	30.0
Distance (Dmax = 0)	66.7		61.5		64.3		52.4		60.9		55.0		52.0		45.0	

Source: Authors' calculations based on unbisnet.un.org.

Note: BRICS is Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Columns may not total due to rounding.

with nuclear weapons (China, India, and Russia) cast split votes. This is remarkable since, as mentioned earlier, the main line of conflict in this committee lies traditionally between the nuclear powers on the one hand and virtually all other countries on the other.⁵⁴ Compared to the other BRICS countries, India cast opposite votes on several resolutions regarding a nuclear weapons-free world, which reflects the fact that India, in contrast to the other BRICS countries, has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since it became a self-declared nuclear power in 1998, India has structurally opposed General Assembly resolutions calling for restrictions on nuclear proliferation beyond the five established nuclear weapons states, stating that other nuclear powers should start to reduce their larger nuclear stockpiles first.⁵⁵ India also cast an opposite no vote on the resolution on conventional arms control at the regional and sub-regional levels, with the other BRICS generally voting in favor of this resolution—the exemption being Russia that abstained in the 2008–2014 sessions. Russia cast opposite votes compared with the other BRICS as they voted in favor of the resolutions on the follow-up to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons in the 2006–2014 period.

The cohesion between the BRICS countries is much larger when looking at the General Assembly's Third and Fourth Committees. Table 3 shows that complete agreement among the BRICS countries occurred in 52.4–73.3 percent of the resolutions voted on in the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, with the period 2011–2014 showing the highest levels of complete agreement. Besides that, one can observe only a limited number of complete disagreements. Looking at the last three UNGA sessions, in the period 2011–2014, this implied that on the fourteen or fifteen resolutions adopted with a vote, the five countries were in complete agreement on ten or eleven resolutions and in complete disagreement on only one or two resolutions. The distance score varied from 71.1–82.1 for the period 2006–2014, with the 2013–2014 score marking the highest score in terms of voting cohesion.

More specifically, the main point of disagreement was the moratorium on the use of the death penalty, with China and India casting opposite votes than the other BRICS countries in the years 2007, 2008, and 2010. This situation can be explained by the fact that, whereas Russia de facto banned the death penalty and the death penalty is outlawed in South Africa and outlawed for ordinary crimes in Brazil, it is still permitted in India and China and also often carried out in the latter.

The situation of human rights in Myanmar equally led to divisions between China, India, and Russia on the one hand and Brazil and South Africa on the other in the entire 2006–2014 period. In 2006–2009, Brazil voted in favor of and South Africa abstained on a resolution condemning the human rights situation in Myanmar, with the other three BRICS rejecting the resolution; in 2009–2011, Brazil abstained and South Africa voted in favor; in 2011–2012, India voted in favor while Brazil and South Africa abstained and China and Russia voted

Table 3 BRICS Cohesion in the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (number, percentage of resolutions, and distance score)

	2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014	
	No.	%														
Resolutions with vote	21	100.0	21	100.0	19	100.0	15	100.0	16	100.0	15	100.0	15	100.0	14	100.0
Complete agreements	11	52.4	13	61.9	10	52.6	10	66.7	10	62.5	11	73.3	10	66.7	10	71.4
Partial agreements	8	38.1	5	23.8	7	36.8	4	26.7	3	18.8	2	13.3	3	20.0	3	21.4
Complete disagreements	2	9.5	3	14.3	2	10.5	1	6.7	3	18.8	2	13.3	2	13.3	1	7.1
Distance (Dmax = 0)	71.4		73.8		71.1		80.0		71.9		80.0		76.7		82.1	

Source: Authors' calculations based on unbisnet.un.org.

Note: BRICS is Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Columns may not total due to rounding.

Table 4 BRICS Cohesion in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (number, percentage of resolutions, and distance score)

	2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014	
	No.	%														
Resolutions with vote	16	100.0	14	100.0	14	100.0	14	100.0	17	100.0	14	100.0	14	100.0	14	100.0
Complete agreements	12	75.0	12	85.7	12	85.7	12	85.7	15	88.2	12	85.7	12	85.7	12	85.7
Partial agreements	4	25.0	2	14.3	2	14.3	2	14.3	2	11.8	2	14.3	2	14.3	2	14.3
Complete disagreements	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Distance (Dmax = 0)	87.5		92.9		92.9		92.9		94.1		92.9		92.9		92.9	

Source: Authors' calculations based on unbisnet.un.org.

Note: BRICS is Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Columns may not total due to rounding.

against it. Cleavages also appeared with regard to resolutions on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In 2006–2008 as well as in 2010–2012, Brazil voted in favor of this resolution; China and Russia opposed it, with South Africa and India abstaining. In 2008–2010, both China and Russia voted against the resolution on North Korea with the other three abstaining. In 2012–2014, the resolutions on North Korea as well as on Myanmar were adopted without a vote, implying that all countries in the General Assembly could agree on the proposed—often general and vague—wording of the resolutions. The varied voting pattern among the BRICS countries equally confirms what Western actors have gradually learned: the democratic countries of Brazil, India, and South Africa cannot be automatically counted on when Western countries want to condemn human rights violations in third countries, as these three countries often prioritize the principles of national sovereignty and nonintervention in view of their own colonial pasts.⁵⁶

Table 4 demonstrates that on the vast majority of resolutions voted on in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, the BRICS countries cast identical votes, with a high level of complete agreement, which also remained quite stable in the period 2007–2014 at around 85.7 percent. There were no full disagreements in this committee in the period 2006–2014, making it the General Assembly main committee where the BRICS countries were most cohesive. This means in absolute terms that on the fourteen resolutions voted on (which was the case during six of the eight General Assembly sessions), the five countries were in total agreement in twelve cases, with only two resolutions leading to an abstention. In this light it is also worthwhile to point at the earlier mentioned North-South divide among the UN members, which to a large extent can explain the high extent of cohesion among the parties.⁵⁷ During this period, it was only Russia that abstained on a limited number of resolutions, including on resolutions on Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The other BRICS were part of the General Assembly majority that voted in favor of the resolutions on these issues in the 2006–2014 period, with one exemption being the abstention of China on the investigation of Israeli practices in the 2006–2007 session.

Conclusion

The research question that guided our analysis in this article was: To what extent is the gradual intensification of the BRICS dialogue in the field of foreign policy reflected in their voting behavior at the General Assembly? Referring particularly to Ferdinand's⁵⁸ findings that the voting cohesion in the period 1974–2011 was rather high and recently also growing (on the basis of aggregated data for six time periods), we raised the question whether this trend could be confirmed when looking in more detail at each of the eight annual sessions of the General Assembly that were held since the start of the BRIC

dialogue in 2006. Our analysis of the voting behavior in the period 2006–2014 did not confirm the hypothesis that a stronger voting cohesion would follow from the start point of the BRIC consultation in 2006 and from the intensification of the BRICS interaction from 2011 onward in particular. Overall, we thus found no systematic increase in the voting cohesion since the start of the BRIC consultation in 2006.

As demonstrated in the previous section, the BRICS level of voting cohesion remained rather stable in the General Assembly in general, both when looking at the percentage of complete and partial agreements on General Assembly resolutions and when looking at the distance score (see the discussion on methodology earlier in this article). Moreover, the level of complete agreement—meaning that all five BRICS countries cast identical votes (either yes, no, or abstain)—proves to be rather limited, varying between 56.5 percent and 63.0 percent. The lowest level of cohesion, reached in 2013–2014, was the last General Assembly session that we examined in this analysis. These findings seem to confirm the doubts voiced earlier in this article about the potential impact of the intensified BRICS dialogue in view of the persisting conflicts in national interests and agendas. Michael Emerson's⁵⁹ question—"Do the BRICS Make a Bloc?"—can thus still be answered negatively when looking at voting cohesion in the General Assembly.

A differentiated view appears when assessing the voting patterns in the General Assembly main committees. The evolution in the Disarmament and International Security Committee leads to even more sobering conclusions, as a trend of decreasing cohesion among the BRICS countries can be detected, with the five countries in 2013–2014 casting identical votes on only 20 percent of the resolutions. The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee shows a higher though rather flexuous level of BRICS voting cohesion, with full agreements up to around 70 percent of the votes during the last General Assembly sessions. The higher level of BRICS cohesion in the Special Political and Decolonization Committee is reflected in the stable percentage of complete agreement around 85 percent of the resolutions during six of the last seven General Assembly sessions. However, this high level of BRICS cohesion becomes less spectacular when seen within the broader context of the efforts in the General Assembly to reach a wide consensus on these resolutions.

When looking at the topics on which the BRICS disagree or only partially agree, it appears that the death penalty, human rights, and, in particular, nuclear proliferation are the main subjects of diverging views. Earlier findings about the main obstacles for voting cohesion in the period 1974–2011⁶⁰ are thus largely confirmed for the period 2006–2014. However, in the past couple of years, there was even more divergence on the issue of nuclear proliferation than in the preceding years.

As mentioned above, some critical remarks have to be made with regard to measuring voting cohesion in the General Assembly. Nonetheless, it allows

us to conclude that, at least in the General Assembly, the BRICS consultation did not lead to remarkably stronger voting cohesion—not even in the years since the intensification of the BRICS interaction from 2011 on. However, as has been argued elsewhere,⁶¹ the BRICS format must be seen within the wider context of various emerging power networks (e.g., IBSA [India, Brazil, and South Africa] and BASIC [Brazil, South Africa, India, and China]) and multi-lateral frameworks in the Southern Hemisphere that all serve to complement, influence, and sometimes also counter the Western-dominated multilateral organizations. 🌐

Notes

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32. Luif, “EU Cohesion in the UN General Assembly.”

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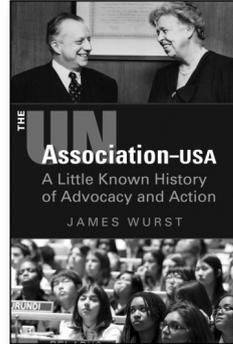


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