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The Construction of Power in the Strategic Narratives of the BRICS

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Abstract

Rising powers, collectively joined in informal diplomatic groups such as the BRICS, aim to influence the meaning of the international order by means of “strategic narratives.” Together, the BRICS develop strategic narratives that support their aspiration for a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order and which produce a positive perception of the group. This paper evaluates how BRICS’s system and identity narratives combine geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives. Narrative tension emerges due to their embeddedness in contradicting power constructions, namely a geostrategic perspective and a multipolar perspective. The synchronization of these three narratives is undermined when there is a fall in perceived power, economic recession or a lack of accountability and transparency practices. Strategic narrative analysis helps to think about and analyze power in global politics.

Key words: *BRICS, Power, Rising Powers, Strategic Narratives*

Words: 7939

The Construction of Power in the Strategic Narratives of the BRICS

Introduction

Strategic narrative analysis helps to evaluate how power is narratively constructed in political documents. Rising powers try to shape the discursive environment about the international order and their own political identity using strategic narratives. BRICS, an informal diplomatic group comprising of five rising powers, namely Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, commenced political cooperation in 2009 after a decade of spectacular economic growth, and shared disappointment in international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (originally BRIC was without 'S'; South Africa was formally invited in 2010 and joined the BRICS in 2011). Disillusioned with asymmetric globalization and commensurate with their economic power, the BRICS group is seeking more voice and representation in international institutions and organizations. To do so effectively, "strategic narratives" are formed to influence global agenda-setting, legitimize policies and produce a positive perception of the group.¹

The BRICS group contests together existing narratives of the international order, and they are at the same time, constructing strategic narratives that aim to support their aspiration for a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order.² Initially concerned with the global financial crisis of 2008, and the legitimacy of international financial institutions, there was the "occurrence of spillover effects of cooperation" in the area of regional security, food and agriculture, and development.³ Over the years, the BRICS group expanded its ministerial meetings and working groups on a range of issues. In particular, the group branched out in the subsequent summits in the areas of science and education, culture, ICT, climate change, and other issues of shared concern.⁴

The rational and feasibility of BRICS is actively debated in scholarship.⁵ There are two common approaches to study the outcome of their cooperation. From a geostrategic objective, the bargaining power of the BRICS members within international organizations and institutions is limited, despite some

¹ Alister, Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 8.

² BRIC, "Second BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement", (April 15, 2010), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 2.

³ Oliver Stuenkel, "The Financial Crisis, Contested Legitimacy, and the Genesis of Intra-BRICS Cooperation", *Global Governance*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2013), p. 626.

⁴ BRICS Research Group, "2015 BRICS Ufa Compliance Report," (October 12, 2016), available: <http://brics.utoronto.ca/compliance/2015-ufa-compliance.pdf>, p. 5-6.

⁵ See for an overview of the academic debate, John Kirton, "Explaining the BRICS Summit Solid, Strengthening Success", *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2015), p. 1-29.

temporary successes.⁶ In the present study, geostrategy “describes where a state directs its military and diplomatic efforts.”⁷ Approaches in terms of voting behaviour in international organizations and institutions, as an outcome of socialization between the five members, do not seem to have a coordinated approach. From a multipolar perspective and South-South relations lens, horizontal relations and win-win outcomes are critiqued.⁸ The two approaches examine two forms of power constructions. First, it is making sense of the BRICS as a “narrative about rising economic power in a post-Cold War world,”⁹ international recognition and the aspired democratization of multilateralism. Second, the BRICS group tells a narrative about coexistence,¹⁰ solidarity and mutual beneficial relations.

This paper examines how this dual power construction is narrated coherently in BRICS’s joint declarations and aims to foresee possible repercussions of this narrative script. It discusses how the BRICS group shape strategic narratives that are embedded in a geostrategic perspective as well as a multipolar perspective that favours horizontal relations and win-win outcomes. The first section of this paper clarifies what is meant by the communication of strategic narratives. It will then go on to describe factors that improve the effectiveness of strategic narratives (i.e. coherency and strength). The third part identifies the three narratives that give shape to both the identity and system narrative of the BRICS. The fourth part discusses how these three narratives are embedded in contradicting power constructions. The last part hypothesizes the possible repercussions of this power construction.

Strategic Narratives

A strategic narrative analysis helps to understand the narrative construction of power in global politics. The term power is used here to refer to Castell’s definition: “Power is the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actor’s will, interests, and values.”¹¹ This encompasses both the use of coercion, or the threat thereof, and persuasion and argument. The study of strategic narratives is situated in the “narrative turn”

⁶ Peter Ferdinand, “Rising powers at the UN: An Analysis of the Voting Behaviour of BRICS in the General Assembly”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2014), p. 376–391. See also Mayya Romanova, “The European Union against a BRICS Wall? The Case of the Syrian Crisis”, *EU Diplomacy Paper*, Vol. 3 (2015), p. 1–45. Oliver Stuenkel, “The Financial Crisis, Contested Legitimacy, and the Genesis of Intra-BRICS Cooperation”, *Global Governance*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2013), p. 612.

⁷ Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. X.

⁸ Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia (eds.), *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media Ltd, 2015); Ian Taylor, “BRICS in Africa and Underdevelopment: How Different?”, in Steen Fryba Christensen and Li Xing (eds.), *Emerging Powers, Emerging Markets, Emerging Societies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 162–184; Pádraig Carmody, *The Rise of the BRICS in Africa: The Geopolitics of South-South Relations* (London and New York: Zed Books 2013).

⁹ Alister, Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 38.

¹⁰ Cedric de Coning, Thomas Mandrup and Liselotte Odgaard, *The BRICS and Coexistence: An Alternative Vision on World Order* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

¹¹ Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 10.

in international relations. This turn assumed that “the history of international relations is not only studied through narrative but is seen as being constituted by narrative, that is, as a narrative domain of action, agency and identity.”¹² Narratives give form to the discursive environment around us, and we understand events as narratives. Narratives are “constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal* emplotment.”¹³ As a theoretical framework (i.e. narrative as object), strategic narratives are defined as

a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate.¹⁴

Strategic narratives are politically-motivated instruments, shaped to advance the objectives and goals of political actors. Narratives become strategic when “organizational stakeholders create a discourse of direction (whether about becoming, being, or having been) to understand and influence one another’s actions.”¹⁵ Political actors shape strategic narratives with the aim to change the behaviour of domestic and international actors.

Strategic narrative success or failure depends on audience perception, which is strongly influenced by their engagement with, and understanding of political information. The communication process is shaped by the existence of competing narratives, because “[n]o state’s narrative exists in a vacuum: the ether of international affairs is filled with multiple narratives – competing and overlapping, epochal and issue-specific.”¹⁶ Whether strategic narratives manage to persuade is contingent on the actor’s agency to narrate. In the present study, narrative agency is defined as the human action of ‘grasping together’ experiences and events in a way that brings together order and disorder.”¹⁷ This agency is influenced by the actor’s national and international reputation, and the actor’s willingness and ability to engage in the new media ecology of the 21st century.¹⁸ In the case of the BRICS group, agency is performed by the individual member states, and together, as an informal diplomatic group.

¹² Geoffrey Roberts, “History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2006), p. 707.

¹³ Margaret Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1994), p. 616. Italics in the original.

¹⁴ Alister, Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

¹⁵ David Barry and Michael Elmes, “Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse”, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1997), p. 432. See also Emanuel Adler, “Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates”, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage 2012), p. 113.

¹⁶ Alister, Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 102.

¹⁷ Hanna Meretoja, “Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2014), p. 98.

¹⁸ Alister, Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 148.

A strategic narrative analysis assumes the powerful role of language to influence public opinion. Political actors communicate strategic narratives with the objective to change the behaviour of domestic and foreign audiences that is suitable to their interests. Narratives become strategic because they serve a political purpose. Strategic narratives are therefore not exact representations of events in the real world. Instead, political actors aim for plausibility and verisimilitude, for narratives “are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness [*sic*].”¹⁹ This then accentuates the role of argument and persuasion in political communication.

Strategic narrative analysis identifies and examines three types of narratives: system, identity and issue narratives.²⁰ System narratives give meaning to the structure of international affairs. Studies examine for example the Cold War and the post-Cold War period.²¹ Identity narratives make sense of the political actors that engage and try to influence this discursive environment. Studies include the work on national narratives²² and the perception of European identity-narratives.²³ Issue narratives give form to policy debates, including in the area of military interventions²⁴ and public diplomacy.²⁵ The three types of narratives are interrelated because political actors need to negotiate their power in both the macro-level and the specific issue debates.

This paper examines the alignment of system and identity narratives. The alignment of identity and system narratives is natural - fitting in the dialectical relationship between agency and structure.²⁶ In the discussion on order transition, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin emphasize the role that recognition plays for emerging powers: “Their aim therefore is not to take the place of the existing sole superpower, but rather to change the context in which this superpower operates, thus expanding their influence and playing a shaping role in an emerging order.”²⁷ Talk about the “rise of the rest” and a “new

¹⁹ Jerome Bruner, “The Narrative Construction of Reality”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1991), p. 4.

²⁰ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 7.

²¹ On order transition, see Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “Understanding International Order and Power Transition: A Strategic Narrative Approach”, in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 276-310.

²² Wayne Porter and Mark Mykleby, *A National Strategic Narrative* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011).

²³ Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland (eds.), *The European Union and the Asia-Pacific: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions of the EU* (London: Routledge, 2008).

²⁴ Beatrice de Graaf, George Dimitriu and Jens Ringsmose, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

²⁵ Falk Hartig, “Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives”, *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4 (2015), p. 245-258.

²⁶ See the constructivist debate, for example Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2001), p. 391-416; Nicholas Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

²⁷ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “Understanding International Order and Power Transition: A Strategic Narrative Approach”, in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 278.

world order” has encouraged many scholars to discuss the role of rising powers and how that order will look like. Strategic narrative analysis helps to understand how rising powers imagine and communicate their identity and system narratives.

While challenges in the military domain have shaped the theoretical and empirical discussions on strategic narratives,²⁸ its use-value is distinctively broader. The BRICS group cooperates in the economic, financial, political, cultural and educational domains amongst others. The members develop strategic narratives to give form and make sense of these interactions. In light of the much-commented diversity of the BRICS members²⁹ and the backdrop of economic and political turmoil,³⁰ a successful narrative is politically desirable as it links “certain events while disentangling others, distinguish good news from bad tidings, and explain who is winning and who is losing.”³¹ The next part discusses factors that contribute to the effective formation of strategic narratives.

Coherency and Strength

There is no success formula for strategic narratives. However, the pursuit of coherency and strength can improve the effectiveness of strategic narratives. It is true that incoherency of strategic narratives may allow for multiple identifications. This would be useful for the BRICS group in light of the many identity differences. However, while a degree of vagueness or contradictions might have been effective in the short run, the paper argues that this in the long term produces confusion and weakness. This part of the paper will discuss the coherency and strength factors.

A coherent strategic narrative should: 1) narrativize past, present and future events in a plot that befits the political actor’s objectives; 2) provide context and glues together/weaves in disruptive events; 3) imply a cause and effect in the means, ways and ends; and 4) be acceptable, plausible. The first element illuminates emplotment, which is “a procedure that configures temporal elements into a whole by ‘grasping them together’ and directing them toward a conclusion or ending.”³² This narrative aspect has strategic value, in ways that it narrates events into a coherent whole according to the political actor’s

²⁸ See for example, Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ministry of Defence, UK, “Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution”, Joint Doctrine Note 1/12 (2012), available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-doctrine-note-1-12-strategic-communication-the-defence-contribution>; NATO, “Military Concept for NATO Strategic Communications”, *Public Intelligence* (2010), available: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/NATO-STRATCOM-Concept.pdf>; US Joint Forces Command, “Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy”, *Joint Warfighting Center* (2010), available: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/doctrine/jwfc/sc_hbk10.pdf.

²⁹ Fabiano Mielniczuk, “BRICS in the Contemporary World: Changing Identities, Converging Interests”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (2013), p. 1075–1090; Ramesh Thakur, “How Representative are BRICS?”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 10 (2014), p. 1791–1808.

³⁰ Simon Tisdal, “Has the BRICS Bubble Burst?”, *The Guardian* (March 27, 2016), available: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/mar/27/brics-bubble-burst-brazil-russia-india-china-south-africa>.

³¹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 23.

³² Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Narrative and Self-Concept”, *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1991), p. 141.

wishes. The second element addresses the narrative's ability to address the conflict by offering an appropriate resolution.³³ The third element highlights causality in the text and it accentuates the means-end calculative purpose of a narrative. The plausible causality between the means and ends is examined in the text; it does not study the causality of strategic narratives and its actual influence in political reality. Although influence in the latter is obviously the overall political aim. The fourth element of plausibility is case and time specific, in which the degree of ambiguity should be just right. Too much room for interpretation leaves for narrative contestation, and too little presents a narrative rigor that leaves for little manoeuvring space in the communication to plural audiences.

Strength can be judged by the successful compliance of a narrative grammar. George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf have compiled a set of five indicators to assess the strength of strategic narratives.³⁴ These five indicators address a compelling mission, legitimacy (related to credibility), the promise of success, the absence or presence of counternarratives and the fit of a strategic communications plan.³⁵ Evidently, strength and coherency are co-dependent factors. For example, the causality of means, ways and ends in a narrative gives shape to a tangible promise of success. Also, the narrative's plausibility is related to the legitimacy of the decision-making processes and norms and values articulated in the narrative.

In addition, coherency emerges when multi-state organizations' strategic narratives and individual states' strategic narratives relate and interact positively.³⁶ It aligns narratives of the Self and the Self-Other, in which the Other is an extension of the Self. In the case of the BRICS group, there needs to be a positive relation between the joint declarations and the respective political narratives of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It is demanding for a multi-state organization to provide overarching strategic narratives between the national interests of the member states (i.e. national interests are also shaped in the form of strategic narratives) and the members' shared concerns (for example the environment, international financial institutions, custom unions, international terrorism etc.). A convergence of multiple narratives that make up an overarching strategic narrative is challenging in light

³³ Combining "act" and "purpose", see Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 7.

³⁴ George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf, "Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2016), p. 7. Based on the work of Andreas Antoniadis, Ben O'Loughlin and Alister Miskimmon, "Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives", *The Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex*, Working paper No. 7 (2010), available: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/12302/>; Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Jens Ringsmose and Berit Kaja Børgesen, "Shaping Public Attitudes towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives", *European Security*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2011), p. 505–528; Remko Voogd and Amber Vos, "Publieke Steun voor de Missie in Uruzgan, Welke Factoren Bepalen het Draagvlak?" [Public support for the mission in Uruzgan, which factors determine the political foundation?], *Militaire Spectator*, Vol. 179, No. 9 (2010), p. 440–453.

³⁵ George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf, "Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2016), p. 7.

³⁶ In addition to the four earlier mentioned coherency factors.

of these factors.

The relation between multi-state organizations' strategic narratives and individual states' strategic narratives is strengthened when they each communicate a compelling and corresponding mission purpose. Legitimacy is also derived from this positive interaction, in which both the multi-state organization and the individual member states assume the same decision-making processes and norms. For example, the quest for multilateral reform and inclusive participation should be communicated on the various levels. However, a strong narrative requires a symbiosis of rhetoric and action to avoid propaganda accusations.³⁷ Advocacy for more voice and representation on the multilateral level gains legitimacy when strategic narratives about decision-making processes in the member states mirror this aspiration. The aspired democratization of the multilateral space produces narrative-pressure in the BRICS countries, due to a weak commitment and compliance to include civil society in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, the accommodation of strategic narratives on the national and multilateral levels often falls short of narrative-maintenance (in particular due to regime changes). The positive alignment between the strategic narratives of multi-state organizations and individual member states is therefore challenging at best.

So far, this paper has focused on the theoretical concept of strategic narratives and factors that improve the effectiveness of their formation. The following section will discuss the combination of the three narratives that give form to BRICS's identity and system narratives. It expands on former work,³⁸ in which the "BRICS system narrative of dynamic growth"³⁹ and the "BRICS identity narrative of inclusive participation" were identified and discussed. This paper builds on these classifications by assessing the supporting narratives that contain both the system and identity narratives of the BRICS.

Geostrategic, Economic and Solidarity narratives

A documentary analysis of BRICS joint declarations (time span of 2009 – 2016) illuminated the persistent use of three narratives that give shape to both the system and identity narratives of the BRICS group.⁴⁰ The joint declarations put forward geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives. These narratives are

³⁷ George Dimitriu and Beatrice de Graaf, "Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2016), p. 6.

³⁸ Carolijn van Noort, "Study of Strategic Narratives: The Case of BRICS", *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2017), p. 121–129.

³⁹ Mentioned in Ph.D. thesis as the "BRICS system narrative of dynamic growth" in comparison to an earlier description of a "BRICS system narrative of global recovery." See Carolijn van Noort, *The Strategic Narratives of the BRICS: A Coherent Story?*, University of Otago Our Archive (2018), available: <https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/handle/10523/7916>.

⁴⁰ More on methodology and data analysis, see Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, *Doing Narrative Research* (London: Sage, 2008). See also Lindsay Prior, *Using Documents in Social Research* (London: Sage, 2011); Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (London: Sage 1993).

interrelated in political objectives and practice, but for the clarity of this next part separately examined. This section also discusses who the implicit audiences are in the BRICS joint declarations.

Geostrategic narrative

The geostrategic narrative is based on the political and diplomatic relations as well as the international aspirations of the group. It combines the identity narrative of the BRICS members as rising powers and their communication of a system narrative of dynamic growth buttressed by multipolarity aspirations.⁴¹ Evidently, the separation of narratives is artificial – the identity of political actors is necessarily intertwined with and restrained by the existing international order. The concept of “rising powers” has a degree of vagueness, illustrated by Yale Ferguson’s pondering: “Rising in what respects, from what level, compared with what, how measured, how inexorably rising, and so what anyway?”⁴² This ambiguity of the rising-powers concept offers both opportunities and challenges to the BRICS members. To communicate their rise in the international order in peaceful and cooperative terms, the BRICS group “reaffirm[s] that the 21st century should be marked by peace, security, development, and cooperation.”⁴³

In BRICS’s aim to “re-order” the world,⁴⁴ the geostrategic narrative navigates and negotiates the legitimacy of the current order. This negotiation is supported by the “rise of the rest” narrative, in which rising powers are seeking international recognition commensurate with their political aspirations.⁴⁵ The BRICS countries seek international recognition by emphasizing their active leadership roles in high-profile political and social gatherings. For example, the joint communiqués express gratitude and appraisal: “We commend China for the successful hosting of the 11th G20 Leaders’ Summit in Hangzhou”⁴⁶ and “[w]e congratulate Brazil on hosting the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012 and welcome the outcome.”⁴⁷ These statements highlight the leadership roles of these rising powers in international organisations.

The geostrategic narrative helps to explain the naturalness of their cooperation. The diplomatic relations between “Global South” partners are sensible after decades of Western-centrism. It is propelled

⁴¹ BRIC, “Second BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement”, (April 15, 2010), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 2.

⁴² Yale H. Ferguson, “Rising Powers and Global Governance: Theoretical Perspectives”, in Jamie Gaskarth (eds.), *Rising Powers, Global Governance, and Global Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 21.

⁴³ BRICS, “eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan”, (March 27, 2013), available: <http://brics5.co.za/about-brics/summit-declaration/fifth-summit/>, article 22.

⁴⁴ Steen Fryba Christensen and Li Xing, *Emerging Powers, Emerging Markets, Emerging Societies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 4-5.

⁴⁵ Colin Sparks, “How Coherent is the BRICS Grouping?”, in Kaarle Nordenstreng and Daya Kishan Thussu (eds.), *Mapping BRICS Media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 60.

⁴⁶ BRICS, “Goa Declaration”, (October 16, 2016), available:

<http://brics2016.gov.in/upload/Goa%20Declaration%20and%20Action%20Plan.pdf>, article 41.

⁴⁷ BRICS, “eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan”, (March 27, 2013), available: <http://brics5.co.za/about-brics/summit-declaration/fifth-summit/>, article 35.

by a shared disappointment in the existing structure of international institutions.⁴⁸ The BRICS members aspire together a structural reform of multilateral systems, in particular the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The reordering of the system supports a “strong client orientation that recognizes each country’s development needs.”⁴⁹ The principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”⁵⁰ emphasizes the calculative approach to benefit the members’ political situations. The cooperation of the BRICS members is therefore explained through geostrategic terms.

Economic narrative

The economic narrative gives shape to the identity narrative of the BRICS members as emerging market economies, and an economic order that is fair.⁵¹ Complementary cooperation is beneficial to each of the members. The declaration in 2011 stated that the group is “committed to assure that the BRICS countries will continue to enjoy strong and sustained economic growth supported by [their] increased cooperation in economic, finance and trade matters, which will contribute to the long-term steady, sound and balanced growth of the world economy.”⁵² The coining of the BRIC investment-theme in 2001 has also boosted the members’ identity narratives.⁵³ While the credibility of South Africa as emerging market economy has been disputed elsewhere,⁵⁴ its membership of the BRICS has arguably established and promoted its position as the “African Gateway.”⁵⁵ This complements the other four BRIC members, which “include the factory of the world (China), the garden of the world (Brazil), the gas station of the world (Russia), and the back office of the world (India).”⁵⁶ The economic narrative also gives shape to BRICS’s preferred system narrative of dynamic growth. Commensurate with their economic growth paths, the BRICS powers aim to re-order the global mechanisms that failed to prevent and curb the spill-over effects of the 2008 global financial crisis.⁵⁷ The group therefore advocates for the reform of international financial institutions.

The economic narrative of the BRICS promotes the idea of strategic economic partnerships. The

⁴⁸ BRICS, “eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan”, (March 27, 2013), available: <http://brics5.co.za/about-brics/summit-declaration/fifth-summit/>, article 2.

⁴⁹ BRICS, “Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan”, (July 15, 2014), available: <http://brics.itamaraty.gov.br/category-english/21-documents/223-sixth-summit-declaration-and-action-plan>, article 19.

⁵⁰ See for example BRICS, “Delhi Declaration,” (March 29, 2012), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 22.

⁵¹ BRICS, “Delhi Declaration”, (March 29, 2012), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 9.

⁵² BRICS, “Sanya Declaration and Action Plan”, (April 14, 2011), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 13.

⁵³ Without the ‘S’ of South Africa.

⁵⁴ Jim O’Neill, “Building BRICS: From Conceptual Category to Rising Reality”, in John Kirton, Marina Larionova and Yoginder Alagh (eds.), *BRICS: The 2012 New Delhi Summit* (London: Newsdesk Media Group, 2012).

⁵⁵ Michael Kahn, “The BRICs and South Africa as the Gateway to Africa”, *The Journal of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, Vol. 111, No. 7 (2011), p. 496.

⁵⁶ Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 493.

⁵⁷ BRICS, “eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan”, (March 27, 2013), available: <http://brics5.co.za/about-brics/summit-declaration/fifth-summit/>, article 7.

coordination of the BRICS members encourages dialogue in vital economic sectors. The “Strategy for the BRICS Economic Partnership” document encourages complementary cooperation in the areas of “trade and investment, manufacturing and minerals processing, energy, agricultural cooperation, science, technology and innovation, financial cooperation, connectivity and ICT cooperation.”⁵⁸ This dialogue is facilitated through a proliferation of meetings among high officials as well as workshops, forums and meetings between the various stakeholders. The same document emphasizes connectivity as a discursive frame. Connectivity gives shape to symbolic, institutional and material practices.⁵⁹ In symbolic terms, connectivity celebrates strategic economic partnerships between commodity producers and consumers.⁶⁰ Connectivity also has an institutional character, in which the BRICS group aims to facilitate the coordination between the members. For example, the group seeks “to create a favorable environment for further development of trade, investment and business cooperation between the BRICS countries, including through removing excessive administrative barriers and trade impediments.”⁶¹ And lastly, it connects the various economic sectors of the respective countries. It tries to harmonize the complementary cooperation between relative new economic partners.⁶²

Political narratives about strategic economic partnerships tend to exaggerate the positive influence that cooperation has on the respective members’ economies. The connectivity discourse aims to harmonize the competing economic interests and existing resources (natural and industrial), by emphasizing an overarching narrative of dynamic growth. Clearly, the economies of the BRICS members are significantly varied in size and growth (take for example a comparison of South Africa’s and China’s economies). In light of the hot debates about the “new scramble for Africa” and the rise of new dependencies, with China at the strong end of the game, the BRICS members are unequal economic powers.⁶³ It is therefore very challenging for the BRICS group to create overarching strategic narratives that overcome these economic perceptions.

System and identity narratives about the economy are necessarily aligned because it coordinates the perception of the BRICS members as emerging market economies in an ever-increasing independent global economy. The multilateral systems that were put in place after WWII are no longer suitable to

⁵⁸ BRICS, “Ufa Declaration and Action Plan”, (July 9, 2015), available: <http://en.brics2015.ru/documents/>, article 17.

⁵⁹ Margaret Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1994), p. 616.

⁶⁰ Brazil and Russia versus China and India, see Jim O’Neill, *The Growth Map: Economic Opportunity in the BRICs and Beyond* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2011), p. 125.

⁶¹ BRICS, “Ufa Declaration and Action Plan”, (July 9, 2015), available: <http://en.brics2015.ru/documents/>, article 72.

⁶² Although trade and FDI between the members have steadily increased in the first decade of the twenty-first century, see Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Release 392: 8th BRICS Summit – Goa, India, October 15– 16, 2016”, *Itamaraty* (October 11, 2016), available: <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/en/press-releases/14921-8th-brics-summit-go-a-india-october-15-16-2016>.

⁶³ Alison Ayers, “Beyond Myths, Lies and Stereotypes: The Political Economy of a ‘New Scramble for Africa’”, *New Political Economy*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2013), p. 227–257.

support the BRICS members in the twenty-first century. The economic narrative gives shape to BRICS's identity narrative as economic powerhouses as well as their shared desire to reshape the narrative environment in which these emerging market economies operate (i.e. and benefit from).

Solidarity narrative

The solidarity narrative is next to the geostrategic and economic narratives a central pillar in BRICS's political communication. Under the heading of horizontal relations, inclusive participation and equality, the BRICS group promotes solidarity. The solidarity narrative gives shape to BRICS's identity narrative and system narratives. Noticeably, "solidarity" as such can only be enacted in relation to others. The solidarity rhetoric is directed to other emerging and developing countries as well as in terms of a "harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity."⁶⁴ The Goa Declaration in 2016 emphasized the development of "strategic partnership[s] in the spirit of openness, solidarity, equality, mutual understanding, inclusiveness and mutually beneficial cooperation."⁶⁵ The notion of inclusive participation complements the solidarity rhetoric and has a two-fold purpose. Outwards, it aims to broaden the international playing field through the democratization of international institutions and organizations, and the development of equitable opportunities. The establishment of the New Development Bank reinforces their objective, believing that "the nature of the [New Development] Bank must shift from an institution that essentially mediates North-South cooperation to an institution that promotes equal partnership with all countries as a way to deal with development issues and to overcome an outdated donor-recipient dichotomy."⁶⁶ Inwards, it promises the inclusion and engagement of non-state actors in policy discussions. For example, in the area of global health, the declaration in 2015 confirms BRICS's commitment to "seek enhanced partnerships by the international community and other stakeholders from both the public and private sectors, including the civil society and academia to improve health for all."⁶⁷

The solidarity narrative celebrates altruism and "best-practice" in international affairs. The BRICS group is committed to the Millennium Development Goals, a post-2015 development agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015.⁶⁸ The solidarity narrative is exposed to criticism as it has not lived up to its full potential. Ian Taylor, for example, is critical of "the diplomatic claims made by the emerging economies that their engagement with Africa is qualitatively different – and *better* – than that of the North, with relentless incantations about 'South-South' ties, 'solidarity', 'mutual benefits',

⁶⁴ BRIC, "Second BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement", (April 15, 2010), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 5.

⁶⁵ BRICS, "Goa Declaration", (October 16, 2016), available:

<http://brics2016.gov.in/upload/Goa%20Declaration%20and%20Action%20Plan.pdf>, article 2.

⁶⁶ BRICS, "Delhi Declaration", (March 29, 2012), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 12.

⁶⁷ BRICS, "Ufa Declaration and Action Plan", (July 9, 2015), available: <http://en.brics2015.ru/documents/>, article 60.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, article 65.

‘win-win relations’ and ‘partnerships’.”⁶⁹ The solidarity narrative of the BRICS group is associated with their economic narrative and this convergence causes tension.⁷⁰

Audiences

The strategic narratives of the BRICS group address both domestic and international audiences, and combine state actors, corporate elites, and civil society groups. The United States and European state actors are addressed through the group’s advocacy to legitimize international organizations and institutions, due to their existing leverage. This outreach is primarily embedded in the geostrategic perspective. Civil society groups in the BRICS countries are addressed through a framework of horizontal cooperation and solidarity, which reinforces the multipolar power system. Corporate elites gain from both these power constructions, as international recognition, strategic economic partnerships, and the democratization of financial institutions, are objectives suitable to their interests. The strategic narratives of the BRICS group should convey meaning to all these audiences. In terms of shaping coherent and strong strategic narratives this is a very onerous undertaking due to the diverging interests of these state and non-state actors. The perception of the strategic narratives of the BRICS is not addressed in this study because it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The next part discusses the convergence of these three narratives. The embeddedness in different power constructions causes narrative tension.

Power in Global Politics

The BRICS group emphasized that “[a]n inclusive process of growth for the world economy is not only a matter of solidarity but also an issue of strategic importance for global political and economic stability.”⁷¹ The geostrategic and economic narratives are embedded in a geostrategic view on power, and the solidarity narrative is embedded in a multipolar power system. The successful convergence of these three narratives is undermined when there is a fall in perceived power, economic recession or a lack of accountability and transparency practices.

The rising power narrative of the BRICS members loses its strength when the perception of the members’ power has decreased, or when the perceived power distribution among the five members has favoured one (frequently interpreted in the case of China) at the expense of the other four. International

⁶⁹ Ian Taylor, “BRICS in Africa and Underdevelopment: How Different?”, in Steen Fryba Christensen and Li Xing (eds.), *Emerging Powers, Emerging Markets, Emerging Societies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 180. Italics in the original.

⁷⁰ Abdenur Adriana Erthal and Maiara Folly, “The New Development Bank and the Institutionalization of the BRICS”, *Revolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (2015), p. 66–92.

⁷¹ BRIC, “Second BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement”, (April 15, 2010), available: <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/index.html#goa>, article 16.

recognition of the political actors is vital in this narrative for it to have leverage (i.e. influence the discursive framework about order transition). The economic narrative is supported by the startling growth of the BRICS economies. In light of the economic downturn, the narrative loses its essential “parts” that make up the “whole”. The “end of the BRICS” prediction is contingent on the economic growth trajectories.⁷² This counternarrative also responded to the closure of the Goldman Sachs Group’ BRIC fund⁷³ that facilitated foreign direct investment. The solidarity narrative is exposed to hypocrisy because of its altruistic promises.⁷⁴ The practice and behaviour of the emerging powers do not seem to be significantly different from North-South models of interactions. Instead, solidarity-talk smoothens over national, economic interests at the expense of promised social and environmental justice. A lack of accountability and transparency practices, often examined through the lens of development assistance,⁷⁵ undermines the coherency of the solidarity narrative. The solidarity narrative lacks strength when it is jointly communicated with an economic narrative that favours the interests of the private sector. Altruism and profitability are not two faces of the same coin.

A successful convergence between the three narratives, which contain BRICS’s system and identity narratives, is challenging. The combination of geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives is present on both the member state, and the multi-state organizational level. There is in that sense a mirror image of power constructions on the multiple levels; nevertheless, the combination of the three narratives is irreconcilable in its current form. A notable example of a challenging convergence is Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa with the BRICS strategic narratives. Brazil’s former President Lula da Silva, pursued a strong solidarity rhetoric while diversifying and intensifying Brazil’s international partners.⁷⁶ This approach was supported by a combination of the three narratives, but primarily communicated through the solidarity narrative. A framework of compassion and historical guilt shaped Brazil’s relations with Africa. President Lula explained in an interview with the BBC: “It’s not just about reaching business deals but it’s the strategy of a politician who is conscious of the historical debt towards Africa.”⁷⁷ The consistency of this strategic narrative was supported by the spectacular economic growth of Brazil and Lula’s two consecutive terms in office. However, political crises (i.e. the impeachment of

⁷² Steve Johnson, “The Brics are dead. Long Live the Ticks”, *Financial Times* (January 28, 2016), available: <https://www.ft.com/content/b1756028-c355-11e5-808f-8231cd71622e>.

⁷³ Ira Iosebshvili, “Goldman closes BRIC Fund”, *The Wall Street Journal* (November 9, 2015), available: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/goldman-closes-bric-fund-1447116375>.

⁷⁴ See for example, Lidia Cabral and Alex Shankland, “Narratives of Brazil-Africa Cooperation for Agricultural Development: New Paradigms?”, *China and Brazil in African Agriculture Working Paper*, No. 51 (2013), p. 21.

⁷⁵ Preferably called technical cooperation, see Sean Burges, “Brazil’s International Development Co-operation: Old and New Motivations”, *Development Policy Review*, Vol. 32, No. 8 (2014), p. 356.

⁷⁶ Celso Amorim, “Brazilian Foreign Policy under President Lula (2003–2010): An Overview”, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, Vol. 53, special edition (2010), p. 231.

⁷⁷ BBC [editorial], “Brazil’s Lula ‘Sorry’ for Slavery”, *BBC News* (April 14, 2005), available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4446647.stm>.

President Dilma Rousseff in 2016) and the effects of the global economic crisis domestically (i.e. severe economic recession in Brazil from 2015 and onwards), resulted in a changing narrative emphasis.

While a combination of geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives were continuously pursued to give shape to Brazil's foreign policy agenda, the economic narratives gained a prominent status. In comparison, José Serra, Minister of Foreign Affairs to President Temer, the successor of President Dilma, argued that "contrary to what was propagated among us, modern Africa does not ask for compassion, but expects an effective economic, technological and investment exchange."⁷⁸ In consideration of effective strategic narratives, consistency over a period of time enhances coherency and strength. A changing narrative focus may be perceived as a narrative breach. As Sandra Bry in her empirical work on Brazilian development cooperation observed, the recipients "still regard Brazil as a cooperation partner that is distinct from traditional donors, but this perception can only be maintained if the cooperation is not conditioned by commercial interests."⁷⁹ When Brazil's solidarity rhetoric was given a price-tag, it destabilised the narrative's coherency and strength.

Conflicting power constructions embedded in both a geostrategic perspective and a multipolar perspective causes narrative tension. Let us now consider plausible implications of this construction for order transitioning.

Plausible Projections

What can we learn from the construction of power in the strategic narratives of the BRICS group? It can help improve our arguments about the future influence of these political actors. Surely, strategic narratives are not forecasting tools. They are instrumental to the extent that they shape the perception of events, those of the past and the present, as well as the imagined future. Strategic narratives that give shape to future events are narrated in the present. Hence, they are not coercive but directive – the narratives support a movement of "becoming". A strategic narrative analysis of power helps to illuminate whether this "becoming" is plausible. In particular, the divergent power constructions in the geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives challenge the BRICS group to communicate coherent and strong strategic narratives. The embeddedness of power in both a geostrategic perspective and a multipolar perspective perpetuates narrative tension.

⁷⁸ José Serra, "Speech by Minister José Serra on the Occasion of the Ceremony in which he took office as Minister of Foreign Affairs", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Brazil* (May 18, 2016), available: <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/en/speeches-articles-and-interviews/minister-of-foreign-affairs-speeches/14044-speech-by-minister-jose-serra-on-the-occasion-of-the-ceremony-in-which-he-took-office-as-minister-of-foreign-affairs-brasilia-may-18-2016>.

⁷⁹ Sandra Bry, "The Production of Soft Power: Practising Solidarity in Brazilian South-South Development Projects", *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2015), p. 453.

Political actors should continuously engage with strategic narratives for their effectiveness. The effectiveness depends as stated before, on the compliance with coherency and strength factors. Coherency and strength are challenging elements in the context of time (i.e. consistency), economic cycles (i.e. downturns and recession) and illegitimate narratives about political leaders. The impression of narrative consistency is important, while adaptation to changing policies is vital too. A disruption from earlier strategic narratives is quickly perceived as a narrative breach. Therefore, to study the compliance of coherency and strength, over a period of time, will help indicate the influence of the BRICS group in the future.

Coherency is very much depended on the relation and interaction between the multi-state organizations' strategic narratives and the individual members' strategic narratives. That being said, a negative alignment does not necessarily reject the narrative agency of the individual member states. The "rise-of-China" narrative is, arguably, more enduring than the BRICS strategic narratives, due to a steady development of political capital and economic leverage (in particular, through its establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the development of the One Belt One Road Initiative). However, the strategic narratives of China are equally exposed to a mixture of contradicting promises in the pursuit of regional economic aspirations. The win-win rhetoric that underpins Chinese strategic economic partnerships are carefully examined through a geopolitical lens.⁸⁰

The diversity of the BRICS members, in political, economic and cultural terms, shaped the frequent dismissal of BRICS as an influential political actor in the international arena.⁸¹ This study on the construction of power in the BRICS strategic narratives expands this conclusion, using different methods. In particular, the narrativist approach illuminated the divergences in power constructions, and the plausible repercussions of this formation. Clearly, the BRICS-narrative continues to capture the imaginations of domestic and international audiences. The establishment of the high-profile New Development Bank has empowered and renewed the BRICS-bubble to a certain degree.⁸² However, the endurance of this narrative is vulnerable in the context of harmful political and economic events in the respective member states⁸³ as well as the weak convergence of the three narratives.

The rise of the BRICS powers in the international arena has unsettled existing narratives about power distribution. The "rise of the rest" narrative created the possible imagination of a post-Western

⁸⁰ Peter Ferdinand, "Westward ho – the China Dream and 'One Belt, One Road': Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping", *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), p. 941–957.

⁸¹ For example, Martin Wolf, "Does the BRICS Group matter?", interview in *Council on Foreign Relations* by Christopher Alessi, (March 30, 2012), available: <https://www.cfr.org/interview/does-brics-group-matter>.

⁸² Karin Costa Fazquez, Supriya Roychoudhury and Caio Borges, "New Development Bank is BRICS' Best Card", *Financial Times* (September 5, 2017), available: <https://www.ft.com/content/cc7c7ee6-918b-11e7-a9e6-11d2f0ebb7f0>.

⁸³ Cyril Prinsloo, "BRICS – The Dream deferred, for now", *South African Institute of International Affairs* (October 19, 2016), available: <http://www.saiia.org.za/opinion-analysis/brics-the-dream-deferred-for-now>.

world order.⁸⁴ BRICS's aspiration for a fair and more democratic multipolar world order is presented as a peaceful and natural development. There are various concerns with this imagination. A multipolar order is not necessarily perceived as a peaceful alternative, as they are "riven with rivalries over borders, resources, and status."⁸⁵ BRICS's aspired system narratives can be considered as a disguise for power redistribution in favour of a select group of rising powers. Yet, this disguise is not considerably hidden when taken into account the negotiation and contestation in intergovernmental organizations such as the World Trade Organization.⁸⁶ Well-formed strategic narratives can capture these concerns about order transitions, and evoke a sense of trust (legitimacy) and a promise of success for both "old" and "new" powers. The ability to do so effectively lies within the narrative agency of political actors, their narrative competence (skills to narrate) and the imposing and limiting narrative environment of symbolic, institutional and material practices.⁸⁷

This analysis emphasizes the limitations of strategic narratives to shape a discursive environment. Strategic narratives are not the holy grails in influencing domestic and international audiences, but they are neither dismissible. The complexity to win the "battle of narratives" in the twenty-first century might leave political actors apathic vis-à-vis strategic narrative formation. However, as Freedman argued, "it is as well to avoid illusions of control, but in the end all we can do is act as if we can influence events. To do otherwise is to succumb to fatalism."⁸⁸ The omnipresence of narratives in the daily lives of people, as object and method of understanding, makes engagement in strategic narratives a pivotal political instrument.

Conclusion

This paper examined the narrative construction of power in BRICS's joint declarations and the possible repercussions of this construction. After introducing the theoretical framework of strategic narratives and coherency and strength as indicators for effectiveness, the paper then identified three significant narratives in BRICS's joint declarations. The strategic identity and system narratives of the BRICS group contain geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives. The convergence of the three narratives is challenging, due to their embeddedness in different power systems. The geostrategic and economic narratives are embedded in a geostrategic view on power and the solidarity narrative is embedded in a

⁸⁴ Oliver Stuenkel, *Post Western World* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2016).

⁸⁵ Ramesh Thakur, "How Representative are BRICS?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 10 (2014), p. 1792.

⁸⁶ See for example emerging states and WTO negotiations, Charalampos Efstathiopoulos, "Reformist Multipolarity and Global Trade Governance in an Era of Systematic Power Redistribution", *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2016), p. 3–21.

⁸⁷ Margaret Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1994), p. 605–649.

⁸⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 622.

multipolar power system.

The understanding of the construction of power in the strategic narratives of the BRICS helps us to improve our arguments about the future influence of these political actors. Tension or contradictions undermines the effectiveness of strategic narratives. The exaggeration of one narrative at the disguise of other narratives (solidarity vis-à-vis economic and geostrategic narratives) also leads to incongruities, especially in the face of political regime change.

Further work on the perception of power construction in the BRICS strategic narratives among European and North-American audiences would be worthwhile, due to the political leverage of these state actors in international organisations and institutions. The advocacy for more voice and representation benefits from clear, compelling and plausible narratives. The issue of order transition is an intriguing one, which needs careful attention in the case of incoherent and weak strategic narratives. The narrativized aspiration of “rising powers” about a “fair and democratic multipolar world order” is open to interpretation due to the ambiguity of these precise terms. The present study adds to the growing body of research that indicates the use-value of strategic narrative analysis.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.