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Incentives Behind the Choice to Accept or Decline BRICS Membership:
A Comparative Study of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia

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Abstract

The expansion of BRICS as both an economic and geopolitical bloc in the Global South presents a compelling puzzle in international relations. Despite sharing structural characteristics such as G20 membership, strong economic ties with China, rising powers have arrived at divergent decisions regarding BRICS membership. This thesis examines Saudi Arabia and Indonesia as case studies to explore the reasons behind their contrasting responses. Drawing on role theory, the research investigates how identity influences national role conceptions and ultimately shapes foreign policy behaviour. The decision to accept or reject BRICS membership is analysed as a reflection of a state's perceived compatibility between its national role conception and the expected behaviours arising from an organisation's identity. Methodologically, the thesis combines Process Tracing with a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) to establish causal mechanisms and isolate the explanatory role of identity. The findings suggest that different perceptions of compatibility between national role conception, which are informed by identity, and expected role conception embedded in BRICS's identity account for the divergent membership decisions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.

Introduction

BRICS has emerged not only as an economic alliance but as a geopolitical bloc aimed at reshaping global order. While BRICS was initially founded to promote development cooperation and establish financial alternatives to Western-dominated institutions, it has since evolved into a strategic platform enabling members—most notably China—to extend their influence, push reform agendas, and challenge the U.S.-centric liberal international order (Stuenkel, 2015). Scholars have increasingly described BRICS as a catalyst for global order transformation, championing alternative governance models and amplifying the collective voice of the Global South (Stuenkel, 2015; Acharya, 2014).

The bloc's recent expansion efforts, notably its invitation to several emerging powers to join as new members, reflect not only an aspiration for inclusivity but also a geopolitical strategy to consolidate ideational legitimacy. For aspiring members, the nature of BRICS offers both opportunities and constraints. Thus, the decision to accept or decline BRICS membership can be understood as a strategic choice with far-reaching implications. It involves not only weighing material incentives but also assessing the compatibility between national identity and the bloc's emerging geopolitical identity. This makes the responses of rising powers—those whom BRICS actively seeks to partner with—an important subject of

inquiry. While some invited states, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Iran, moved quickly to formalise their accession, others adopted more cautious stances. Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, despite their active engagement and strategic importance, initially withheld full commitment. Indonesia later confirmed its accession in January 2025, while Saudi Arabia indirectly declined BRICS membership in the BRICS Plus summit in 2024, only maintaining economic engagement. This divergence raises a central research question: Why do some rising powers choose to join BRICS while others refuse?

To address this question, this study investigates how the difference in the compatibility between national role conceptions formed by identities of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia and the expected role conceptions arising from BRICS' identity leads to their contrasting responses to BRICS membership. The research engages with the broader literature on states' consideration towards participating in intergovernmental organisations—a field that draws from a range of International Relations theories to explain why and how states choose to engage with international institutions. These theoretical frameworks offer valuable but incomplete insights, particularly when it comes to accounting for identity-based motivations in foreign policy behaviour. To fill in this gap, I adopt a constructivist-informed approach to role theory, placing emphasis on how decision-makers perceive their state's identity and appropriate behaviour in regional and global contexts. The hypothesis guiding this research is: Differences in perception of the compatibility between national role conception, which are formed by national identity, and expected role conception stemming from BRICS's identity lead to the divergent decisions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia toward BRICS membership.

Methodologically, my thesis applies a combination of Process Tracing and Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). Process Tracing is used to establish the sequential causal pathway from identity (X - independent variable) to national role conception (M1 - mechanism 1), to interpretation of BRICS identity (M2 - mechanism 2), and finally to the decision on membership (Y - dependent variable/outcome). MSSD enables a structured comparison between the two cases by holding constant structural similarities and isolating identity-based variance as the decisive explanatory factor (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Both countries are examined over the period from 2013—when BRICS first announced its expansion ambitions—to 2024 for Saudi Arabia (when this country indirectly declined BRICS invitation to join as an official member), and 2025 for Indonesia (the year in which Indonesia formalised its accession).

The findings confirm the core proposition of role theory. Saudi Arabia's identity—centred on religious legitimacy and its leadership role in the Gulf—shaped national role conceptions that could not be fulfilled within BRICS. Although the Kingdom maintained strong economic relations with BRICS countries, it did not perceive the group as compatible with the roles it sees appropriate for itself. In contrast, Indonesia's diplomatic identity was shaped by *bebas-aktif principles* and its self-ascribed identity as a Pacific Ocean member. This identity guided the country to adopt national role conceptions that emphasise inclusive multilateralism and leadership among developing states. These role conceptions were perceived as compatible with BRICS's identity, especially in its emphasis on Global South cooperation and multipolarity. As a result, Indonesia confirmed its membership. These findings support the thesis argument that foreign policy behaviour—particularly decisions to accept or decline institutional membership—is shaped by how states perceive the compatibility between their identity-based role conception and the expected behaviours of the organisation.

This thesis is structured as follows. Section 1 reviews existing literature on states' considerations regarding participation in international institutions. Section 2 introduces role theory, related key conceptions, and the causal mechanism it creates regarding the identity- and role-driven motives of states in their decisions to join international organisations. Section 3 introduces the research design and its application, while Section 4 includes the analysis part, first within-case of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, then a comparative part comparing the main driver deciding their diverging decisions towards BRICS membership. The last section—Conclusion—summarises the main findings, discusses limitations, and suggests directions for further research.

Literature review

My topic aims to investigate the incentive behind foreign policy actions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia regarding BRICS membership, which refers to the literature of states examining their participation in intergovernmental institutions. States' consideration to join international organisations (IOs) has been explained through various international relations theories. From the realist viewpoint, in an anarchic international system where no overarching authority exists, states prioritise survival and power maximisation. As Waltz (1979, p. 111) argues, states must depend on “the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves.” Thus, cooperation through IOs can be explained by the balance of power mechanism which aims to maintain an equilibrium among states to avoid any one state from

achieving dominance (Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 167–168; Waltz, 1979, pp. 117–128). However, realists remain sceptical of IOs as instruments for long-term cooperation and argue that states would not delegate meaningful authority to supranational institutions.

In contrast, institutionalist scholars focus on the functions of international institutions. Institutions are perceived as “recognized patterns of practice around which expectations converge” (Young, 1980, p. 337), helping states coordinate and reduce transaction costs. Sophisticated institutionalists, or regime theorists, argue that interaction and repeated negotiations among states create interdependence and potentially transform state preferences, forming “interests in cooperation” (Keohane, 1984, p. 8). Nevertheless, this assumption of change in self-interest has drawn criticism from those who find this view overly optimistic, as it presumes a degree of trust that may not align with the anarchic structure of international relations.

In an attempt to reconcile rationalist assumptions with long-term cooperation, Keohane (1984) introduced a rational institutionalist approach. While acknowledging states as preference-maximising actors, he also emphasised the role of reciprocity and reputation. States, he argued, would continue to maintain international regimes even without a hegemon, as long as the regimes provide them with consistent benefits (Keohane, 1984, p. 51). This perspective bridges traditional realism with a more dynamic understanding of strategic interaction.

Game theory and collective action theory add a different dimension by explaining why cooperation is not always achieved, even when mutually beneficial. Keohane (1984, p. 65), borrowing from Olson (1965), noted that rational actors may choose not to cooperate due to the free-rider problem, especially in the provision of global public goods. This problem applies where states may defect if they perceive that they can benefit from others’ contributions without bearing the cost themselves.

Constructivist scholars take this debate further by challenging the rationalist view of fixed interests. Wendt (1992, pp. 411–419) claimed that through institutional engagement, states undergo a process of socialisation where norms and identities are internalised. Over time, participation in IOs can reshape a state’s understanding of its interests and appropriate behaviour, regardless of whether initial engagement was strategic or egoistic. In this sense, IOs are not merely arenas for cooperation but also social environments that influence member states’ identities and policy directions.

Further nuances emerge from the argument that while powerful states may structure IOs to serve their own interests, they must design them in ways that are acceptable to weaker

states, thereby enabling participation. Realist and constructivist scholars alike acknowledge that IOs do more than coordinate policies; they also produce norms, generate legitimacy, and reinforce or contest existing power structures. As McNeely (1995) noted, IOs may possess limited material power but can significantly influence member states' interests and intersubjective understandings, sometimes producing consequences beyond the original intentions of their founders.

Although the aforementioned theories provide useful frameworks to understand why states choose to cooperate, they contain notable gaps in explaining how states perceive their own roles and act on them in the international system. Realism prioritises structural constraints and material interests, but fails to account for internal identity-based motivations that shape foreign policy behaviour. Institutionalism, while offering a functional view of international organisations, relies heavily on assumptions of changing interests through interaction, which has been criticised for its reliance on an idealistic level of trust and cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Mearsheimer). Similarly, game theory and collective action models highlight strategic defection and the free-rider problem (Olson, 1965; Keohane, 1984), yet continue to treat state preferences as fixed and exogenous. Constructivism introduces norms and identity as key elements, but much of its literature remains concentrated on the emergence of norms in the international system, offering limited attention to the domestic side of the nation in shaping state preferences. In contrast, role theory shifts the focus to foreign policy decision-makers and systematically explores their view on appropriate behaviours of their country in global affairs, while also probing into the origins of these role conceptions (Breuning, 2011, p. 25). This enables a more grounded understanding of how internally held role identities influence the decision to participate in international organisations—an aspect not sufficiently addressed by existing approaches.

Theory

The decision of developing countries to accept or decline BRICS membership cannot be fully understood through material interests alone. While economic incentives remain significant, recent scholarship has pointed to the growing geopolitical and normative dimensions of BRICS. Scholars argue that BRICS has expanded beyond economic coordination to offer member states a stage for projecting alternative, non-Western narratives and countering the Western-dominated global order (Kavalski, 2013; Stuenkel, 2015). In this sense, BRICS does not function solely as a strategic group, but also provides a platform where emerging powers express their identity and challenge the Western-centred order. This characteristic makes

membership decisions more complex, as states are required to assess not only short-term benefits but also the long-term implications for their self-defined roles in global politics. Role theory, which focuses on national role conception as formulated by foreign policy decision-makers, provides a useful framework to analyse such considerations (Holsti, 1970). As BRICS continues to shape the collective identity and normative direction of its members, states must evaluate the compatibility between their existing role conception and the identity that may emerge from full participation. Therefore, the decision to join BRICS is not merely strategic but also reflective of the compatibility between the state's identity and that of BRICS membership.

Early role theorists connected closely to structural approaches of international relations which disregarded the agent side in agent-structure relations. They argued the structure—the international system—made states adopt some specific roles. Indeed, this approach leads to the emphasis on the attribution of states such as the connection between state size and foreign policy behaviour, although size remains as a problematic concept (Breuning, 2011, pp. 17-18). Therefore, Harnisch (2011) suggested that the US role theorists who stuck to material traits of structural approach cannot take advantage of strengths of role theory: its ability to find out the transformative potential of the agent towards the structure. On the other hand, Holsti, one of the early role theorists, recognised the interaction between structure and agent and realised the significance of external impacts from the structure at the same time (Holsti, 1970, p. 242). In his definition of role theory, he laid concentration on national role conception (NRC) referring to individual decision-makers: “the policymakers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems” (Holsti, 1970, p. 246). This viewpoint later on was linked to constructivism as it helped pointing out the shared relation of role theory and constructivism to identity and self-image (Herrmann, 2003, as cited in Breuning, 2011, p. 20) and contribution to agent-structure debate.

Role theory discusses certain significant concepts including role, role conception and role enactment. The idea of role origins from sociology, which is best described by Harnisch (2011, p. 7) that “emerge at the interface between internal role conception and external role expectations.” Roles, therefore, are relational. Role conception¹ is “a set of norms expressing

¹ There are multiple ways in which role conception is defined and perceived. After summarising main arguments from scholars discussing the term national role conception and its relation to other concepts, Breuning (2011, pp. 24–25) listed three mechanisms that can be applied. Role conception can be identified through the expectations of others via the process of socialisation; through the vision

expected foreign policy behaviour and action orientation” (Harnisch, Frank, and Maull, 2011, p. 8), which can be simply interpreted as ideas of appropriate actions that a state should do. Regarding as a dependent variable in role scholarship, role enactment means “the behavior of an actor when performing a role (Harnisch, 2011, p. 9). In general, foreign behaviour, or role enactment can be investigated by role conception (Breuning, 2011, p. 25).

I adopt the conceptual synthesis of Breuning (2011, p. 26) which emphasises the sources of national role conception—“how actors fashion their role in the international system, navigating between domestic sources of identity and/or cultural heritage, taking advantage of the material resources at their disposal, circumnavigating as best as possible the obstacles imposed by their position in the international structure.” This statement has been distilled after his analysis of intersection between role theory and constructivism, adding nuances that explains identity, culture and material resources as domestic constituencies of national role conception. In addition, states possess their international sources including their position and possibilities in the international system. Considering both sources help states own a cognitive perspective that lies at the convergence of ideational and material aspects of international relations which can be used to explain foreign policy behavior (Breuning, 2011, p. 26).

Ideational side illustrates decision-maker's perceptions of the state's identity, including the ego aspect of role conception (who states think they are); cultural heritage, especially aspects from national history which constitute identity; and the domestic audience. These factors reflect the internal, normative, and symbolic elements that inform how the state sees itself and what roles it believes are appropriate to act in the international system. On the other hand, material side highlights the decision-maker's perspectives of the state's capabilities which mean the usable power resources available in comparison to other states; and the opportunities to act, which refer to situational possibilities created by enduring or temporary external conditions. These elements capture the tangible constraints and enablers that shape what roles can realistically be performed. These ideational and material perceptions converge to form the national role conception. This conception is issue-area and geographically specific, meaning that roles are not universal but vary by context and region.

In the scope of my research, I focus on using the ideational side, particularly state's identity to explain the national role conception which leads to foreign policy behaviours. I adopt the combination of ideas from constructivist-informed role theory of Holsti (1970) and

of a state's leader or leading parties (which tends to employ political values more than historical ones); or through the idiosyncratic views of individual decision makers.

Harnisch (2011) that argues foreign policy starts with how decision-makers perceive their state in the international community, which is shaped by historical narratives, political values, and self-ascribed roles. Role is the basis of identity as the core of identity is understood as “the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance” (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 225). Therefore, the relational characteristic of the role emphasises the selectivity of identity that a state wants to maintain. This idea suggests the importance of identity in shaping the appropriate foreign policy behaviours of the state.

Within role theory scholarship, another notion emerged from the actual situation when states often possess multiple roles in the international system—role conflict. It is defined as “the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behaviour of a person” (Biddle, 1986, p.82, as cited in Karim, 2022, p. 3). There are two types of conflict, including inter-role (conflict between roles) and intra-role conflict (conflict within roles). In the context of this research, I emphasise the inter-role conflict as it occurs when states obtain two or more positions, causing the reduction of one role’s salience when another is enacted (Karim, 2022, p. 3). Applying this to my research: when a state decides to join an international institution, it considers the possibility of role conflict, which impacts its identity and, in turn, its national role conception. The central concern becomes whether the identity of the bloc, which leads to recommended actions for member states, is compatible with their own national role conception (Harnisch, 2012; Karim, 2022).

Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia ground their foreign policy in clearly defined identities, which inform their respective national role conceptions. Saudi Arabia’s identity—articulated in Vision 2030—rests on three pillars: custodianship of Islam, stabilisation of the Gulf, and economic connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Indonesia, meanwhile, maintains the principle of *bebas-aktif*, which under Jokowi has taken the form of economic diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and an active identity as a Pacific Ocean state. These identity frameworks shaped how each state interpreted BRICS’s invitation, ultimately influencing whether the bloc was seen as consistent with their foreign policy direction.

Role theory, in the context of my research, helps explain that a state chooses to participate in an international institution when it perceives the compatibility between its national role conception (formed by its identity) and the expected behaviours arising from an organisation’s identity. In contrast, when such compatibility is not perceived, the decision is withheld. Regarding the application of this theory, my hypothesis is: Differences in

perception of the compatibility between national role conception, which are formed by national identity, and expected role conception stemming from BRICS's identity lead to the divergent decisions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia toward BRICS membership.

Method

To conduct this research, I apply the Most Similar System Design (MSSD) to compare reasons behind the contrasting decision towards BRICS membership of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. As MSSD is contingent on “the assumption that characteristics shared by one group of systems... are not the cause of the differences in the dependent variable”, it emphasises the investigation on differences across cases as possible logics of the divergence in outcomes (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, p. 32). In the context of my research, I select two cases with a certain number of noteworthy characteristics but give contrasting responses towards BRICS membership. Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia are: (1) rising powers involved in G-20; (2) countries maintaining strong economic ties with China; and (3) significant regional players in the Gulf and Pacific Ocean. However, while Saudi Arabia announced that it would remain a close partner to the bloc rather than becoming a full member, Indonesia, despite a delayed decision, confirmed its official BRICS membership in January 2025. Applying MSSD, in this case, helps to identify the differences in foreign policy consideration that lead to divergent policy behaviours of chosen cases.

Regarding my hypothesis, I expect different views on compatibility between national role conception (built by national identity) and the expected role conception derived from BRICS's identity are the cause of the decision to accept or decline BRICS membership. To evaluate this hypothesis, I first need to validate the causal relation between the independent variable (cause) which is views on compatibility of national and expected role conception of each case, and the dependent variable (outcome) which is the decision to join or not to join BRICS as an official member. Therefore, in terms of method, I apply Process Tracing to track the causal mechanism between the cause and the outcome in each country. This method is defined as “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence ... in light of research questions and hypotheses” that analyses trajectories of change and causation by closely examining sequences involving independent, dependent, and intervening variables (Collier, 2011, pp. 823- 825). The highlight function of this method is the ability to understand mechanisms of the causal chain rather than just correlations. Mechanism, according to Schulhofer-Wohl (2020, p. 14), is “the how by which an outcome comes about.” In brief, this method allows me to examine the sequence of events, decision-making processes, and

justifications provided by each country explaining their foreign policy choices. I track the process from 2013 (when BRICS members started to discuss expanding membership in Durban Summit or 5th BRICS Summit, March 2013) to 2024, the time given for the indirect decision to decline the bloc's membership of Saudi Arabia, and 2025, the milestone when Indonesia became an official member of the organisation.

To start with Process Tracing, I establish a causal chain to test the causal mechanism which role theory suggests. The chain contains independent variable (X), outcome/dependent variable (Y) and mechanism(s) (M) that the process goes through: $X \rightarrow M1 (\rightarrow M2) \rightarrow Y$. Qualitative data includes official governmental documents such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Indonesia's 2024 Foreign Policy White Paper, ministerial statements from the BRICS Plus Summit in Kazan (2024), and full-member BRICS meetings in 2025. It also encompasses public discourse by key decision-makers such as Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono, along with content published through official government communication channels including the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) and Antara News. These data are used to prove the causal relation of each stage of the chain, for example, whether X triggers M1, or whether M2 leads to Y.

To ensure the validity of evidence, I categorise them into four tests for causal inference that Collier (2011) suggested. They are: (1) Straw-in-the-Wind Test: can be understood as early finding which is suggestive to my hypothesis, opening the space for stronger proofs; (2) Double Decisive: convincing evidence that directly confirms my hypothesis, which is rare as they need to eliminate other variants and only authorise my exact hypothesis; (3) Hoop Test and (4) Smoking Gun are like a complementary duo. The Hoop Test provides necessary evidence that is not strong enough on its own but can eliminate competing variants. When I track the causal relation of each chain, I declare what the hoop test is. For example, if X happens, M1 also happens. Then, if the data of chosen cases help them pass the hoop, they confirm the progression of the chain from X to M1. After that, the Smoking Gun Test is used to illustrate sufficient evidence that strengthens the likelihood of the chain. Data for the Smoking Gun demonstrates that M1 occurs only because of X. When combining both the Hoop Test and the Smoking Gun Test, we obtain adequate evidence that both negate the opposite variants and confirms my hypothesis. Notably, although this combination is ideal, other pairings—such as one involving the Straw-in-the-Wind Test and the Hoop Test—can be applied depending on the availability of data sources.

In the operationalisation step, I design a causal pathway which is used to test my hypothesis. The chain goes from X (independent variable) to M1 (mechanism 1), to M2

(mechanism 2), and Y (outcome). The cause—compatibility between national role conception and expected role conception—breaks down into X, M1 and M2 that leads to the dependable variable/outcome Y. First, the identity (X) informs how the national role conception (M1) is formed ($X \rightarrow M1$). M1 then becomes the lens through which Saudi Arabia and Indonesia perceive the compatibility between their national role conceptions and the expected behaviours arising from the identity of BRICS ($M1 \rightarrow M2$). Once they confirm the alignment, they accept the membership invitation of the bloc. If not, the invitation is rejected or withheld ($M2 \rightarrow Y$). Testing this operationalised chain helps confirm the causal mechanism that role theory suggests, demonstrating how different views on compatibility between national role conception (built by national identity) and the expected role conception derived from BRICS's identity result in the divergent decision towards BRICS membership—Saudi Arabia declined full membership in BRICS, while Indonesia formally accepted it.

The combination of Process Tracing and MSSD help me confirm the proposed hypothesis step-by-step. First, I use Process Tracing to make sure the perceived compatibility between national role conception (built by national identity) and the expected role conception derived from BRICS's identity of each country decides their foreign policy actions. Then, MSSD helps me delve more into the qualitative finding which explains why countries sharing similar characteristics can have different policy directions.

Analysis and Findings

According to the established causal chain in the method part ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \rightarrow Y$), each single chain can be basically proven if there is evidence helping the two case studies—Saudi Arabia and Indonesia—pass the hoop test. Specifically, for the sequence $X \rightarrow M1$, the hoop test is: When the selected states formed or adopted their identities, they created national role conceptions (NRC) accordingly. Similarly, the hoop test for the chain $M1 \rightarrow M2$ is: Once Saudi Arabia and Indonesia constituted their NRCs, they illustrated their perceptions on the alignment between their NRCs and expected behaviours stemming from BRICS membership. From M2 to Y, if there was a compatibility shown, the state formally accepted the bloc's membership invitation. In contrast, it declined.

The case of Saudi Arabia

Between 2013 and 2024, Saudi Arabia formally introduced its identity through the Vision for 2030 (2016), centred on the ideational core—as a religious leader in the Arab and Islamic

worlds—and the geostrategic core—as “an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe” (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 13). The former identity was shaped by long-standing historical and symbolic narratives, drew legitimacy from the Kingdom’s custodianship of Islam’s holiest sites and its traditional role as a key mediator in Gulf politics. Based on this mediator role, the Kingdom continuously expressed another ideational identity—regional stabiliser through their active involvement in regional security issues. For instance, they hosted the Syrian Opposition Conference from December 8–10, 2015 in Riyadh to support a political solution aimed at preserving Syria’s territorial unity, in line with the Geneva I decisions. Regarding Sudan, the Kingdom, together with the United States, have served as facilitators to secure a ceasefire between the conflicting parties. X, identities of Saudi Arabia, in this case, include: (1) a religious leader in the Arab and Islamic worlds; (2) a regional stabiliser; and (3) a key player connecting the global trade between three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe.

In the same document of the Vision 2030, the Kingdom listed their plans and actions to “reinforce and diversify” their economy and fulfil the responsibilities emerging from the identities. Emphasising the country being in “the core of Arab and Islamic worlds” and representing the heart of Islam, the Kingdom promised to make their national, Arab, Islamic and ancient cultural sites accessible to everyone, and presented a welcoming attitude to the pilgrims from over the world. As a regional stabiliser, Saudi Arabia constantly raised their voice and called for solutions to security issues in the regions through several platforms including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and BRICS. The Kingdom, at the same time, announced their return to “true moderate and tolerant Islam”, a statement of the Crown Prince. Regarding their identity as “the hub connecting three continents”, the Kingdom announced their changes mostly in domestic economy, such as to diversify their economy by expanding investment in sectors besides gas and oil and to improve its population’s competences, maximise investment capabilities, and attract talents from beyond the border (Vision 2030, 2016, pp. 36-58). With their ultimate strength in the oil industry, the Kingdom also attempted to become a stable oil provider who aims to maintain a stable global oil market.

Saudi Arabia, in this case, passed the aforementioned hoop test. For the two identities formally introduced in the Vision 2030, they listed out their national role conceptions, or appropriate behaviours to fulfill the meaning of them. They also expressed their ideas on moderation which confirmed their role as a regional stabiliser. As a result, the sequence $X \rightarrow M1$ is fundamentally proven.

Applying for the chain of $M1 \rightarrow M2$, my hoop test to prove the occurrence of this sequence is: Once Saudi Arabia constituted their NRC, it illustrated its perception on the alignment between its national role conceptions and expected behaviours stemming from BRICS membership.

After launching the BRICS+ mechanism in the 9th BRICS summit in 2017, China took the first step to bring the mechanism into reality by inviting non-BRICS countries to join the 14th BRICS Summit in Beijing in 2022. The event marked the official occasion where Saudi Arabia appeared with BRICS for the first time. Before this event, there was no evidence in which the Kingdom made reference to BRICS that I could find. All the evidence which can be used to interpret the Kingdom's view on BRICS started from this event.

Saudi Arabia at first demonstrated several promising alignments with the principles and aims of the bloc. Before the official day when the 14th summit occurred, Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated Saudi Arabia's interest in developing future cooperation with BRICS to achieve collective prosperity. During the ministerial meeting of Friends of BRICS in South Africa's Cape Town, Prince Faisal emphasised the Kingdom as "the group's largest commercial partner in the Middle East", indicating the desire to utilise the synthetic economic capabilities of the Kingdom and the bloc. In addition, the country is also committed to humanitarian and development aids, especially in securing food and energy security—one of the foundational focuses of BRICS in their first joint statement in 2009. The Kingdom also expressed support for multilateralism, reaffirmed the centrality of the United Nations, and committed to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, positions that were explicitly reflected in the official joint statements issued by BRICS members. Notably, the country revealed their shared working principles with BRICS member states, including respect for sovereignty, non-interference, and adherence to international law.

Despite positive initial signals, the Kingdom delayed their response to the BRICS membership invitation, which was formally announced by South African President Ramaphosa in the 15th summit of BRICS in Johannesburg in 2023. Regarding the inquiry about the possibility to accept membership status of BRICS, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister told Al Arabiya TV that the Kingdom would investigate carefully and take "the appropriate decision." The postponement has expanded until 2024 when Saudi Arabia only attended BRICS Plus summit in Kazan, instead of BRICS summit, which gathered BRICS member states and promising partners who are likely to hold the membership of the bloc. In his speech, Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah indirectly declined

the BRICS membership by stating the Kingdom “will continue to strengthen its partnerships with the BRICS group”.

All collected evidence confirms that Saudi Arabia indeed evaluated whether BRICS membership aligns with its role conception. The country expressed shared objectives with the group in areas such as economic partnership and humanitarian concerns, along with core values like multilateralism and cooperative engagement. This confirms the link between M1 and M2 in the proposed causal chain.

However, the compatibility between Saudi Arabia’s role conception and that of the blocs was not shown. The Kingdom, through lots of official discourse and statements, only declared themselves as a partner of the bloc and chose to maintain their cooperation within the scope of BRICS Plus. Compared to their national role conceptions stemming from the three regional identities, two of which associated with Islamic and Arabian values; and a regional role as a stabiliser in the Gulf, there is limited space for the Kingdom to act on these role conceptions when obtaining BRICS membership. First, the bloc does not stress on religious values. Their aims, which have been stated from the very first meeting between members, are reforms of international multilateral institutions in general and financial institutions in specific. Second, although the group had their particular views on addressing security issues, Saudi Arabia chose to present themselves as a regional stabiliser of the Gulf through GCC. The reason behind this decision is based on the mutual principle of GCC, which highlighted the rejection of any foreign interference in Arab countries’ affairs (Al Arabiya English, 2023). Regarding the third identity of the Kingdom, the connecting hub for trade between three continents, common economic cooperation is the most beneficial common goal that the Kingdom can achieve by its cooperation with BRICS. Such cooperation can be gained by only maintaining the partnership in the BRICS Plus mechanism. Thus, the Kingdom indirectly declined BRICS membership because it did not perceive the full alignment between its desired activities in the international system and what they could do when fully committed to BRICS.

The case of Indonesia

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Indonesia formalised its BRICS membership in January 2025. Indonesian identity is rooted in the principle of *bebas-aktif* (independent-active), which is considered an “unchallengeable doctrinal basis of Indonesia's foreign policy” (Rizal, 2008, p. 239). Independence refers to non-alignment with global powers, while activeness entails diplomatic participation and contributions to the resolution of international matters. This

orientation does not imply neutrality; instead, it reflects a refusal to be bound by alliances or power blocs (Baiq & Dugis, 2023). The principle has guided Indonesia's foreign policy (Rizal Sukma, 2008, pp. 232–234) and has undergone reinterpretation across different administrations. Under President Jokowi (2014–2024), while the principle remained intact in terms, national role conceptions were adjusted to prioritise bilateral efficiency and the instrumental use of diplomacy for development. The expected foreign policy behaviours under his administration concentrated on securing foreign investment, enhancing market access, attracting infrastructure funding, and promoting Indonesia as an economic participant in regional and multilateral platforms.

To fully explain the decision to join BRICS, identity and national role conceptions must be assessed through the 2024 Foreign Policy White Paper, as it presents an updated interpretation of the long-standing principle during the transition of government. This step mirrors the function of the white paper in Fiji's case, which declared “how Fiji sees itself and how we wish to present ourselves to the world” (Foreign Affairs Fiji, 2024, p. 7). This document explicitly identified the country's regional identity as a Pacific Island state and used “family first” regionalism to structure its external priorities (Foreign Affairs Fiji, 2024, p. 8). The paper served as a direct source validating the formation of national role conceptions from a self-ascribed regional identity, thereby surpassing the threshold of a hoop test. The government defined the country's role behaviours through five guiding ideas: peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international law, rejection of coercion, environmental management, and regional cooperation. These principles formed the expected foreign policy actions associated with its role in the Pacific.

Applying the same logic to Indonesia, the hoop test for $M1 \rightarrow M2$ is: once national role conceptions were constituted, the state must have assessed whether the expected behaviours within BRICS align with its own. The state's official engagement with BRICS began in late 2024 when Foreign Minister Sugiono attended the BRICS Plus Summit in Kazan and confirmed Indonesia's intention to join the bloc. He stated that “Indonesia is intent on joining the BRICS economic bloc as its move aligns with its ‘free and active’ foreign policy principles,” clarifying that it was not a move toward bloc alignment but participation across forums (Antara News, 2024). This confirmed that Indonesia evaluated BRICS through the lens of its existing role conception and found potential alignment.

The statement highlighted BRICS as a platform suited for three focal areas Indonesia prioritised: sustainable development through fulfilled commitments from developed nations, reform of global multilateral institutions to increase inclusivity, and unity among developing

countries (Antara News, 2024). In a separate report, Reuters noted BRICS membership also supported domestic objectives such as food and energy security, poverty alleviation, and human capital development, priority sectors during Jokowi's presidency (Reuters, 2024). These points reaffirm the compatibility between Indonesia's formulated role conceptions and the core activities of BRICS.

Following this assessment, Indonesia formally accepted the membership offer and became a BRICS member in January 2025. During the first BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting attended as a full member, Minister Sugiono reiterated Indonesia's support for peace, multilateral reform, and an expanded role for the Global South (Antara News, 2025). These aims were consistent with Indonesia's national role conception as a development-oriented and diplomatically engaged actor. These statements confirmed that Indonesia perceived a match between BRICS's expected behaviours and its own role preferences. Accordingly, the causal chain from M1 to M2 is verified.

From M2 to Y, if compatibility between national role conceptions and BRICS's expected activities was demonstrated, the decision to join would logically follow. Unlike Saudi Arabia, this compatibility was both acknowledged and acted upon. BRICS was perceived as a functional platform to implement Indonesia's economic diplomacy, advance institutional reform, and foster ties with the Global South. As these actions conformed to the expected behaviours derived from the *bebas-aktif* role conception under Jokowi's government as well as their self-ascribed identity as a Pacific Ocean member under Fiji's presidency, Indonesia accepted the membership invitation and formalised its BRICS status in early 2025. The sequence $M2 \rightarrow Y$ is thus completed, validating the full causal chain $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \rightarrow Y$.

Comparative Analysis

The foregoing process-tracing analysis has outlined how, in both cases, identity formed the starting point for constructing national role conceptions. These role conceptions were then used by decision-makers to evaluate whether the expected behaviours stemming from BRICS membership could be carried out in line with their state's existing identity. While these developments were examined separately, bringing them into comparative focus provides a clearer view of how different interpretations shaped different decisions. To strengthen the central argument of this thesis—that differences in the perceived compatibility between national role conception and the expected role within BRICS account for the final

outcome—this thesis now turns to a comparative framework using Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD).

The logic of MSSD rests on comparing cases that share several structural features but present contrasting outcomes. Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia are G20 economies, maintain economic relations with China, and serve as regional powers in the Gulf and Pacific Ocean. Despite these similarities, Saudi Arabia did not join BRICS, while Indonesia accepted the membership in January 2025. The decision cannot be explained by structural or economic factors alone. Role theory, which focuses on how decision-makers define what is appropriate for their state to do in international politics, offers a better explanation.

Saudi Arabia's role conception, drawn from Vision 2030 and consistently reflected in official discourse, highlights three positions: religious leadership in the Islamic world, regional stabilisation through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and economic linkage between Asia, Africa, and Europe. These positions informed how the Kingdom interpreted BRICS. While BRICS's focus on development and global reform initially appeared aligned with the third identity, the group did not provide expected space for religious engagement or Gulf-related security activities. Instead, the Kingdom continued to voice its concerns and promote solutions through GCC, a platform that reflects and supports its role conception. In the end, Saudi Arabia did not perceive BRICS as offering sufficient space to act on its own terms. This shows the concern of role conflict. Had the Kingdom accepted membership, it would have had to deprioritise certain aspects of its existing role, especially the religious or regional security elements.

Indonesia followed a different pattern. Under the presidency from 2014 to 2024, the principle of *bebas-aktif* remained in terms but was interpreted with an emphasis on practical diplomacy—especially bilateral engagements for development goals. This formed a national role conception focused on acting as a development-oriented state, maintaining non-alignment, and participating in forums that support economic and multilateral cooperation. At the BRICS Plus Summit in October 2024, Indonesia confirmed that joining BRICS was consistent with the *bebas-aktif* principle. Government officials repeatedly stressed that this did not contradict independence, but rather reflected active participation. Indonesia viewed BRICS as a channel to address development gaps, pursue food and energy security, and contribute to inclusive global governance—key functions associated with its role conception. The absence of role conflict made the decision straightforward. Indonesia accepted the invitation and joined the group in January 2025.

Both cases followed the same logic of assessment: they examined whether BRICS's expected behaviours could be carried out without interfering with their existing role conceptions. This is where role theory, and particularly the concept of role conflict, offers the strongest explanatory value. A state will avoid participating in an international organisation when it believes that the expected behaviours will reduce the salience of one or more of its established roles. Saudi Arabia identified such conflict and withheld membership. Indonesia did not, and proceeded. Thus, it is not the material similarities but the way in which each state interpreted the compatibility between their national role conception and BRICS that explains the divergent decisions. Thus, this confirms the thesis: different perceptions of the compatibility between national role conception, which are formed by identity, and the expected role conception stemming from BRICS's identity, are the cause of the contrasting decisions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia toward BRICS membership.

Conclusion

This thesis investigates the reason behind the contrasting decisions of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia in response to BRICS membership. The research applies role theory as the main theoretical lens to evaluate how national role conceptions, formed by identity, shape foreign policy behaviour. It argues that the cause of divergent decisions lies in different perceptions of compatibility between the role conception of each state and the expected role associated with BRICS membership.

The theoretical framework is developed from constructivist-informed role theory, particularly Holsti's (1970) definition of national role conception as policymakers' own understanding of appropriate behaviour in the international or regional context. Following Breuning (2011), the research highlights how identity, shaped by domestic narratives and historical positioning, plays a decisive role in forming this conception. The analysis also draws on the concept of role conflict to show that states consider whether new alignments may constrain their ability to perform established roles. These theoretical elements are operationalised in a causal chain: $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \rightarrow Y$, where identity informs role conception, role conception guides the evaluation of compatibility with BRICS, and this evaluation determines the decision.

Methodologically, the thesis applies Process Tracing to examine how identity leads to specific foreign policy choices in each case, and uses the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) to justify the comparison. Both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia are G20 members, regional leading players with close ties to China, yet they chose opposite paths in response to

BRICS. This allows the research to isolate the key difference: how each state perceived the compatibility between their national role conception and the expected behaviours within the BRICS framework.

The findings confirm the hypothesis. Indonesia, under Jokowi's administration, continued to interpret its *bebas-aktif* principle in terms of active engagement and pragmatic diplomacy for domestic development. The government viewed BRICS as a platform aligned with its objectives in multilateral reform, development cooperation, and Global South solidarity. These goals reflected the country's role conception and informed its decision to join BRICS in 2025. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, despite expressing interest, delayed and ultimately declined full membership. The country recognised shared interests in economic coordination but saw limited space within BRICS to enact roles associated with its religious and strategic identity. As a result, the Kingdom maintained its presence through BRICS Plus rather than full membership. These findings confirm the sequence $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \rightarrow Y$ in both cases.

The research also offers implications for future studies. Role theory can be applied to examine how other states—especially rising powers—respond to global institutions' invitation where material interests are not the sole concern. Further research may include additional components of national role conception beyond identity, such as cultural heritage and historical symbolism. Combining the ideational and material aspects of foreign policy may also provide a more comprehensive framework to understand role enactment. Another direction would be to analyse more closely the interaction between ego expectations and alter expectations, especially how external pressures influence internal perceptions and shape foreign policy choices.

This study also has several limitations. Due to language constraints, the analysis relies primarily on English-language sources and official translations. A number of original documents in Arabic and Indonesian were not directly accessible, which may have restricted access to internal deliberations and domestic framing. In addition, limited access to archived content from news agencies presents challenges, potentially resulting in gaps in the collected data. Lastly, the proposed causal chain may not apply in cases where there is sudden political transition or a shift in institutional narratives, which may interrupt or redirect identity-based foreign policy formation.

Despite these limitations, the research demonstrates the value of role theory in explaining foreign policy behaviour. It shows that decisions about institutional membership are not solely shaped by strategic calculations, but also by the internal logic of identity and

role conception. For multilateral platforms like BRICS, this suggests that membership invitations must consider how well the bloc's self-definition aligns with the identities of potential member states. Understanding this process helps explain why states with similar characteristics may follow different foreign policy paths.

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