



BETWEEN POWER AND COOPERATION: A REALISM- LIBERALISM STUDY OF INDONESIA'S BRICS MEMBERSHIP IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Abstract: *This study analyzes the dynamics of discourse, motivations, and Indonesia's decision to join BRICS, using the lenses of realism and liberalism in international relations. The realist perspective views Indonesia's move as an effort to strengthen its bargaining position amid great power rivalries, diversify export markets, and secure strategic resources, as reflected in the dominance of non-oil and gas exports to China and India based on BPS 2023 data. The liberal perspective emphasizes the opportunities to expand multilateral cooperation, promote South-South solidarity, and access development financing through the New Development Bank. This research employs a qualitative document-based method, triangulating trade data, official government statements, media reports, and international relations literature (Kaufman, 2022; Stuenkel, 2020; Kauppi & Viotti, 2020; Nau, 2019). The findings indicate that Indonesia integrates both realist and liberal approaches in considering its BRICS membership: realist power calculations are manifested through strategic partner diversification, while liberal aspirations are reflected in the commitment to strengthening Global South cooperation. Indonesia's decision to join BRICS reflects a cautious strategic approach, weighing economic-political benefits while upholding the "free and active" foreign policy principle. This study underscores the importance of balancing national interests and multilateral commitments in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy in a multipolar era.*

Keywords: *Realism, Liberalism, BRICS, Indonesia, Multipolarity, Cooperation*

Abstrak: Studi ini menganalisis dinamika wacana, motivasi, dan keputusan Indonesia untuk bergabung dengan BRICS., menggunakan lensa teori realisme dan liberalisme dalam hubungan internasional. Perspektif realisme memandang langkah Indonesia sebagai upaya memperkuat posisi tawar di tengah rivalitas kekuatan besar, mendiversifikasi pasar ekspor, dan mengamankan sumber daya strategis, tercermin dari dominasi ekspor nonmigas ke Tiongkok dan India berdasarkan data BPS 2023. Perspektif liberalisme menyoroti peluang memperluas kerjasama multilateral, solidaritas Selatan-Selatan, dan akses terhadap pembiayaan pembangunan melalui New Development Bank. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis dokumen dengan analisis triangulasi terhadap data perdagangan, pernyataan resmi pemerintah, laporan media, dan literatur teori hubungan internasional (Kaufman 2022; Stuenkel 2020; Kauppi and Viotti 2020; Nau 2019). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Indonesia memadukan pendekatan realis dan liberal dalam mempertimbangkan keanggotaan BRICS: kalkulasi kekuatan realistis diwujudkan melalui diversifikasi mitra strategis, sementara aspirasi liberal tercermin dalam komitmen memperkuat kerjasama global Selatan. Keputusan Indonesia untuk bergabung dengan BRICS mencerminkan kehati-hatian strategis dalam menimbang manfaat ekonomi-politik, sekaligus menjaga prinsip kebijakan luar negeri “bebas aktif”. Temuan studi ini menekankan pentingnya keseimbangan antara kepentingan nasional dan komitmen multilateral dalam merumuskan kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia di era multipolar.

Kata kunci: Realisme, Liberalisme, BRICS, Indonesia Multipolar, Kerjasama

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technologies in the era of globalization has brought about major changes in the way copyrighted works are created, disseminated, and consumed. Digital technology makes it easy for creators to reach a global audience quickly, but at the same time opens up opportunities for copyright infringement, such as illegal duplication and distribution through various digital platforms. The consequences of these infringements not only result in material losses but can also reduce the enthusiasm and productivity of creators in producing new works. In the long run, this condition can hinder the cultural development, innovation, and intellectual progress of a society.

In many countries, copyright regulations have been designed to protect creative works. However, in practice, existing rules are often unable to keep up with the speed of digital technology development. The biggest challenge lies in the gap between the applicable laws and the fast-changing dynamics of the digital world. This suggests that while legal protections are in place, their effectiveness still needs to be evaluated and adjusted to truly address the needs of the times, particularly in the context of copyright infringement in the digital space.

Against this backdrop, an important question arises: how can copyright law continue to be relevant and protect creators amidst evolving digital challenges? This research focuses on exploring the global challenges in copyright protection and analyzing how international legal instruments such as the Bern Convention, TRIPS Agreement, and WIPO can be part of the solution. We aim for this research to develop specific strategies that will enhance the copyright protection system in today's globalized context.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The Realism Theory in International Relations

One of the main theories in the study of international relations, realism emphasizes the importance of power and national interests in determining state behavior. According to this perspective, the international system is anarchic with the main actors being states. Countries act to maintain their sovereignty and security (Kauppi and Viotti 2020). The security and continuity of a state's existence become the focus, so the dynamics of world politics are viewed as a zero-sum game, where the gain of one country means the loss of another. In this framework, alliances or international cooperation are viewed merely as temporary means to maximize relative power or face common threats (Nau, 2019). Realism can be used to understand how BRICS member countries, including Indonesia, strive to enhance their positions in the global order through strategic alliances. Indonesia's membership in BRICS can be seen as an effort to strengthen its geopolitical position and balance the influence of other major powers.

The Liberalism Theory in International Relations

Liberalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of international cooperation, institutions, and norms in creating global peace and stability. This theory argues that countries can achieve common interests through multilateral cooperation and economic integration (Kauppi and Viotti 2020). Liberals believe that although the international system is anarchic, there is room for the creation of interdependence and international institutions that reduce conflict (Kaufman 2022). Through organizations, regimes, and international law, countries can build trust and achieve joint gains that are impossible to attain unilaterally. Thus, power competition can be managed through agreed-upon rules and norms, making international relations not merely a zero-sum game (Nau 2019).

Realism vs. Liberalism

The debate between realism and liberalism is also evident in interpreting the contemporary multipolar world. For realists, the emergence of multiple centers of power (multipolarity) indicates a less stable configuration because each major country strives to balance its power with one another (Kaufman 2022). Meanwhile, for liberals, multipolarity can open up broader opportunities for multilateral cooperation, as there is no single dominant hegemon, allowing collective negotiations to proceed more effectively and be more necessary. The realist balance of power tends to emphasize rivalry, whereas the liberal interdependence balance emphasizes the creation of inclusive institutions to manage the interests of many parties (Kauppi and Viotti 2020).

Table 1. Comparison of International Relations Theories: Realism and Liberalism

Variable / Theory	Realism	Liberalism
Main actor	State	State and non-state actor
Basic assumption	Anarchy	Cooperation
Focus of analysis	Power and security politics among nations	Multilateral cooperation and <i>complex interdependence</i>
Strengths and weaknesses	<p>Strengths: Explaining the dynamics of power, geopolitical competition, and the need for survival strategies.</p> <p>Weaknesses: Neglecting the role of norms, NGOs, and international cooperation; tending to be pessimistic and static in viewing social change.</p>	<p>Strengths: Considering the role of institutions, trade, and cooperation in preventing conflicts. Can explain joint economic development.</p> <p>Weaknesses: Too optimistic about the impact of cooperation, insufficiently emphasizing the behaviour of power (assuming common interests). Often fails to see the imbalance of power.</p>
Policy implications	<p>Emphasis on national interests, strengthening the military and sovereignty. Diplomacy is realistic and defensive. Indonesia in BRICS can leverage this alliance for a balance of power to counter Western influence (by building a multipolar bloc). Policies tend to be unilateral/two-way to protect national security.</p>	<p>Encouraging multilateral cooperation and international institutions. Establishing trade agreements, investments, and economic forums. Indonesia can use BRICS as an alternative trade and investment route (for example, through the BRICS New Development Bank) and strengthen economic integration with developing countries. The policy focuses on dialogue and joint development.</p>

Source: Kauppi and Viotti (2020), analyzed by the researcher.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design based on document studies. This means that data and information are collected from various written sources and then analyzed in depth to answer the research questions. This strategy was chosen because the topic of Indonesia's membership in BRICS is conceptual and related to policy discourse, making it suitable for examination through a literature review. Qualitative methods allow researchers to interpret the meaning behind existing facts and narratives, rather than merely measuring phenomena quantitatively.

The primary data sources in this research are literature and secondary documents. Various textbooks and scholarly journal articles on international relations theory (Kaufman 2022; Kauppi and Viotti 2020; Nau 2019) are used to build the theoretical foundation on realism and liberalism. Furthermore, specific sources regarding BRICS and Indonesia's policies were also examined, including Stuenkel's (2020) book on BRICS, relevant academic articles (Shelepov 2017; Akbar, Subagyo, and Oktaviani 2020; Rahmatulummah, et al., 2025), as well as official data such as Indonesia's trade statistics published by BPS (2024). The use of these various sources is intended to obtain a comprehensive picture and enrich the analysis through data triangulation.

The analysis is conducted using a conceptual framework of two perspectives in International Relations, namely realism and liberalism, as outlined in the theoretical framework. First, the researcher identifies indicators or events that reflect power-based or cooperation-based motivations in the context of Indonesia's plan to join BRICS. Subsequently, the findings from documents and empirical data are interpreted: whether they align more with realist predictions or liberal predictions, or a combination of both. This comparative approach between perspectives helps to highlight different dimensions of the phenomenon being studied.

To maintain objectivity, this research conducts cross-validation among sources and perspectives. Each claim or argument about the motives and implications of Indonesia's membership in BRICS is examined by referring to

several related references. For example, government statements are compared with expert analyses, and economic data (such as export statistics) are interpreted in line with relevant theoretical frameworks. This step ensures that the analysis is not biased towards a single theory, but rather considers the evidence in a balanced manner according to the context.

The research limitations need to be conveyed that this study relies on secondary data and theoretical perspectives, without interviews or surveys with policymakers directly. Nevertheless, this approach is adequate for the purposes of a conceptual exploratory study. The focus of the research is limited to the period until 2025 when the issue of BRICS expansion involving Indonesia is being widely discussed. Thus, the analysis results are expected to be relevant to the current situation and can serve as a foundation for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

BRICS as a Platform for South-South Cooperation

Faridz (2025) in a news article quotes a press statement from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sugiono, *“BRICS is an important platform for Indonesia to strengthen South-South cooperation, ensuring that the voices and aspirations of Global South countries are heard and represented in the global decision-making process. We are fully dedicated to working together with all BRICS members, or with other parties, to create a just, peaceful, and prosperous world.”*. This illustrates the importance of BRICS as a platform for developing countries to collaborate in foreign relations. From another perspective, this statement can also imply criticism that developing countries are not highly valued and their aspirations are not heard in traditional global forums such as the United Nations (UN) (Faridz, 2025).

Both theories can analyze BRICS as a 21st-century geopolitical phenomenon. Realists view BRICS as a strategic alliance of major non-Western countries to strengthen their collective bargaining position against the dominance of traditional superpowers like the United States. On the other hand, the liberal perspective highlights that BRICS also functions as a cooperation forum that seeks to create

new institutions for the common welfare, such as the establishment of the New Development Bank in 2014 (Stuenkel 2020). The question of whether BRICS reflects more competitive or cooperative dynamics has also emerged in academic studies. Pruitt (2022), for example, questions whether BRICS is a “liberal-cooperative intergovernmental collective or a regime of realistic competition among member states”.

Literature on Indonesia's foreign policy shows a history of blending cooperative idealism with realistic calculations. Indonesia actively participated in the 1955 Asian-African Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement. This is based on the developing solidarity among nations but still directed towards supporting Indonesia's national interests (Akbar, Subagyo, and Oktaviani 2020). The "free and active" principle championed by Indonesia reflects a flexible approach: free to determine its stance according to national interests, while actively promoting constructive international cooperation. Thus, although Indonesia's foreign policy rhetoric often emphasizes idealistic values such as South-South solidarity, empirical observations show that the basis of its decision-making is pragmatic and realistic.

Indonesia's Role in the Multipolar World Order

Indonesia's accession to BRICS enhances its stature within the evolving multipolar global framework. Indonesia, as the largest economy in Southeast Asia and the fourth most populous nation globally, possesses the ability to significantly influence global dynamics (Nadya, 2023). Indonesia's membership in BRICS offers a forum for engagement in global governance changes and the promotion of developing nations' interests (Faridz, 2025). This signifies Indonesia's aspiration to emerge as a significant middle power in the global arena.

Indonesia, possessing the greatest GDP in Southeast Asia (exceeding USD 1.3 trillion) (World Bank 2023), benefits from its status as the fourth most populous nation globally, an abundance of critical natural resources including nickel, coal, and palm oil, and a swiftly expanding digital market. In comparison to Thailand and Vietnam, Indonesia possesses superior economic and political capabilities,

along with significant diplomatic influence due to its membership in the G20, MIKTA, and now BRICS (Rahmatulummah et al., 2025).

Implications of Indonesia's Membership in BRICS

Indonesia's membership in BRICS has a major impact in the economic, political, and diplomatic domains (Stuenkel, 2020). Indonesia can utilize collaboration with BRICS nations to broaden export markets, draw investments, and improve infrastructure development from an economic standpoint. This membership enhances Indonesia's standing in global negotiations and amplifies its voice in international forums. Indonesia has the potential to enhance its diplomatic relations with other developing nations and serve as an intermediary between the Global North and South within the international system (Shelepov, 2017).

The Indonesian government has indicated a desire to join BRICS, aiming to improve access to export markets, investment opportunities, and development funding (Rahmatulummah, et al., 2025). Various circles contend that BRICS membership may enhance Indonesia's bargaining power in the global economy and diminish reliance on Western financial institutions (Rahmatulummah et al., 2025). This membership significantly influences Indonesia's defense diplomacy. BRICS offers a novel strategic framework for the coordination of non-traditional security issues, including cyber defense and disinformation. Indonesia, as a newly admitted member, promptly engaged in the BRICS National Security Advisors (NSA) meeting in April 2025 as part of strengthening defense diplomacy (Laras 2025). Furthermore, bilateral cooperation with Russia in terms of procurement and transfer of defense technology, as well as involvement in the initiative to establish a BRICS reinsurance company to reduce dependence on Western financial institutions, demonstrates realistic influence in the political-security interactions of this group.

From an economic-political standpoint, Indonesia's inclusion in BRICS provides access to alternative institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB), which offer greater flexibility than Bretton Woods financial institutions (IMF and World Bank). This offers a chance to fund national infrastructure initiatives without the burden of stringent political stipulations. Nonetheless, obstacles persist: China's preeminence in BRICS, characterized by its substantial GDP contribution and sway

over the group's agenda, together with potential conflicts of interest among members and the threat of sanctions from Western countries, becoming an important part of Indonesia's strategic calculations in the future (Laras 2025).

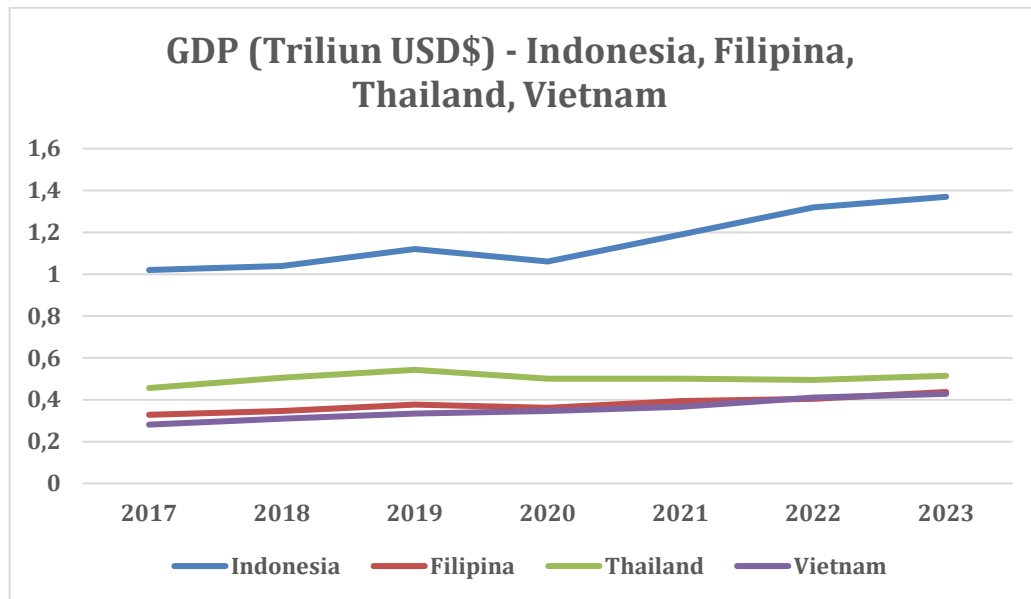
Indonesia, between the period of 2023 and 2024, has not yet become an official member of BRICS but has shown strong interest and participated in several joint initiatives (Reuters 2024). At the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, the alliance invited six new countries to join by January 2024 (including Saudi Arabia and Iran), while Indonesia chose to carefully consider its next steps (Widianto, 2024 in Aulia et al., 2025). This stance reflects a cautious "wait and see" approach: Indonesia is not in a hurry to join, but it is also not distancing itself from BRICS developments.

On January 6, 2025, Indonesia officially became a full member of BRICS, marking a strategic step in expanding its influence on the global stage. This decision was welcomed by other BRICS member countries, including Brazil, which held the presidency at the time, emphasizing that Indonesia, as the largest economy in Southeast Asia, shares a commitment to reforming global governance institutions and deepening South-South cooperation (Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan 2025). Indonesia's decision to join BRICS aligns with the principle of an "active non-aligned" foreign policy. Foreign Minister Sugiono emphasized that this membership reflects Indonesia's commitment to strengthening cooperation with other developing countries based on the principles of equality, mutual respect, and sustainable development. This stance is also a response to international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), which prioritize major countries over developing ones. Developing countries, including Indonesia, advocate for reforms to make the UN Security Council fairer, more representative, and not dominated by major powers.

From a realist perspective, the calculation of power and national interest becomes the main factor in Indonesia's consideration of BRICS. Joining a coalition of emerging economic powers can be seen as a strategy to balance the influence of traditional superpowers and avoid dependence on a single Western bloc. Through BRICS, Indonesia has the opportunity to strengthen its strategic autonomy—for example, by gaining political support from China and Russia—thus not being

entirely reliant on Western support. This approach aligns with the realist premise that states will exploit alliances to enhance their security and position relative to other powers (Kaufman 2022). The realist paradigm describes a form of zero-sum game where the gain of one party is the loss of another. Although Indonesia does not have a national interest in defeating or winning over other countries. Although Indonesia does not have a national interest in defeating or winning over other countries, Indonesia's membership in BRICS can be considered as a form of conflict prevention without the need for an actual conflict to occur.

Meanwhile, from a liberal perspective, Indonesia's motivation is more focused on the cooperation opportunities and mutual benefits offered by BRICS. BRICS membership is seen as a way to open access to alternative development financing sources through the New Development Bank, rather than relying solely on the World Bank or IMF (Stuenkel 2020). Furthermore, the BRICS forum provides a platform for dialogue to share knowledge and best practices among major developing countries, for example, in the fields of technology, health, and addressing global issues. The cooperation formed by BRICS is also seen as a form of a positive-sum game where developing and developed countries collaborate in economic and political development with fair and non-exploitative cooperation terms. Indonesia itself has been involved in collective initiatives with BRICS countries, for example, in the implementation of the Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) plan to prevent tax erosion (Shelepov 2017), which shows that Indonesia's national agenda aligns with the spirit of multilateral cooperation in strengthening a more inclusive global order.



Graphic 1. Comparison of the GDP of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam

Source: World Bank (2023)

The World Bank report (2023) reveals that Indonesia leads Southeast Asia in GDP (USD 1,371,171.15). This demonstrates Indonesia's potential as an influential country in the regional economy and strengthens the legitimacy of its membership in BRICS as a strategic representative of Southeast Asia. With such economic capacity, Indonesia has greater bargaining power in shaping the global agenda, especially regarding trade, investment, and development financing through institutions like the New Development Bank.

Table 2. Indonesia's Export and Import Trade with BRICS countries (China, India, Russia, Brazil, South Africa) in 2023

Country	Indonesia's main exports	Indonesia's main import	Trade Value (2023)
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China	Coal, palm oil, metal ores, rubber, fishery products	Machines, electronics, steel, textiles	USD 127 billion
India	Coal, palm oil, rubber, metal ore	Chemicals, pharmaceuticals, textile products, machinery	USD 38 billion
Russia	Palm oil, rubber, footwear, coffee	Wheat, fertilizer, chemical products, industrial machinery	USD 3,5 billion
Brazil	Rubber, textile footwear, palm oil	Palm oil Sugar, beef, soybean, cotton	USD 5 billion
South Africa	Vehicles, paper, textile, chemical products	Iron, steel, minerals, fruits	USD 2 billion

Source: BPS (2024), analyzed by the researcher.

In trade, Indonesia exports coal, palm oil, rubber, and agricultural products to BRICS member countries. Based on the table above, it is clear that Indonesia's trade cooperation with BRICS countries has significant value and plays a strategic role in supporting national economic growth. China and India occupy the position of primary partners with enormous trade values, while Russia, Brazil, and South Africa also serve as important markets for Indonesia's leading commodity exports. In addition to the trade sector, Indonesia's relations with BRICS countries are also being strengthened through various strategic investments in the infrastructure, energy, and manufacturing industries. These investments not only foster technology transfer and boost national production capacity, but also create opportunities for long-term cooperation that bolster economic independence.

This is reflected in the investments from several BRICS countries such as China: major investments in the Jakarta–Bandung high-speed train (totaling around USD 7.3 billion) (AP News 2023), a nickel smelter in Morowali (over USD 3 billion) (Wijaya 2024), and the construction of the Kuala Tanjung port in North Sumatra (ANTARA 2019). India: the hotel and restaurant sector received the largest investment, amounting to USD 227.6 million, followed by the trade and repair sector with USD 122 million, and the textile industry with USD 98.5 million. West Java became the main recipient of investments, with USD 153.8 million, accounting for 68% of India's total investments (India News Desk 2024). Russia: Investment interest in the defense sector through Sukhoi technology transfer cooperation, as well as plans for building an oil refinery in Tuban (ANTARA 2025).

Table 3. Comparison of Indonesia's Export Value to BRICS Countries and the United States (2023)

Country of destination	Export Value (in million US\$)
China	64,934.58
India	21,348.99
Russia	1,050.12
Brazil	2,357.68
South Africa	456.23
Total BRICS	90,147.60
United States	24,212.00

Source: BPS (2024)

Then, in the export comparison table, it can be seen that China and India are the two largest export markets for Indonesia among BRICS members, while Indonesia's exports to Russia, Brazil, and South Africa are relatively small. China and India together absorb almost one-third of Indonesia's total exports, underscoring Indonesia's high economic interest in these two main partners (BPS

2024). This close economic interconnection supports the liberal view that economic cooperation through the BRICS forum is strategically valuable for Indonesia's development. On the other hand, from a realist perspective, the collaboration can also be interpreted as a strategic move by Indonesia to diversify markets and alliances, thereby reducing the risk of pressure from any particular major power.

Furthermore, Indonesia also has the potential to utilize alternative financing through the New Development Bank (NDB) initiated by BRICS. With this financing, Indonesia can accelerate the development of important infrastructure, especially outside of Java Island, and reduce dependence on traditional financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF. The analysis of the above findings indicates that the motives and impacts of Indonesia's involvement in BRICS cannot be explained by a single theory but rather show a combination of realist and liberal elements in the policy. From a realist perspective, Indonesia wants to strengthen its national capacity—both economically and politically—to be more resilient in facing global power competition. Meanwhile, from a liberal perspective, Indonesia seeks collective benefits in the form of economic growth, regional stability, and a greater role in global governance through cooperation. These two approaches ultimately do not contradict each other but rather complement each other in practice, in line with Pruitt's (2022) observation that BRICS is a hybrid phenomenon that combines cooperative and competitive elements.

CONCLUSIONS

This research concludes that a combination of power and cooperation motives drive Indonesia's membership in BRICS. Through the analysis of realism and liberalism perspectives, it is evident that Indonesia strives to strengthen its strategic position and national capacity while simultaneously forging beneficial cooperation with major developing countries. Realism explains Indonesia's drive to counterbalance global power dominance by embracing alternative alliances, whereas liberalism elucidates Indonesia's desire to engage in collective initiatives to achieve shared prosperity. These two motives run parallel with Indonesia's policy toward a multipolar world.

Theoretically, these findings affirm the relevance and limitations of each IR approach in explaining state behavior. Realism accurately captures Indonesia's calculations to maintain its national interests and sovereignty amid great power competition. On the other hand, liberalism accurately depicts the role of cooperation and international institutions as a means to achieve development and stability goals. The synthesis of these two perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding that countries like Indonesia can simultaneously pursue the interests of power and purpose without being confined to just one paradigm.

Practically, Indonesia's dual approach—combining elements of strength and cooperation—is an adaptive strategy in an increasingly multipolar world environment. By joining (or actively participating) in forums like BRICS, Indonesia diversifies its foreign relations, thus not relying solely on one power axis. This step also opens up new economic opportunities, alternative funding access, and technology transfers that are beneficial for national development. However, Indonesia still needs to ensure that its involvement in BRICS aligns with domestic interests and does not create unnecessary tensions with its traditional partners.

In the future, the dynamics of BRICS and the possibility of Indonesia's membership within it will be greatly influenced by the developments in the global order and the continuously evolving national interests. When Indonesia joins, the implementation of policies in the BRICS forum will be a test of how the balance between realist and liberal approaches is concretely executed. Further research can be directed to monitor Indonesia's policies in BRICS post-membership, as well as their impact on Indonesia's position on the international stage. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding that in a multipolar world, countries like Indonesia are taking a middle path "between power and cooperation" in formulating their diplomatic strategies.

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