

# Strategic Narratives of the BRICS: A Visual Analysis

Written by Carolijn van Noort

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CAROLIJN VAN NOORT, NOV 9 2017

The twenty-first century has seen a rise of new actors on the international stage. One group of rising powers stands out: the BRICS, a diplomatic platform comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Building on the popularity of the 'BRIC' investment theme coined by Jim O'Neill (2001), which captures the startling rise of the four emerging market economies in the global economy, the BRIC powers started cooperation in 2009 and enlarged their membership to South Africa in 2010 (BRICS 2011, article 2). As stipulated in the joint statements drafted at the annual summits, it is the group's mission to foster a fairer and more democratic multipolar world (BRIC 2009, article 12). To do so effectively, the BRICS group formulates 'strategic narratives' to give meaning to the international environment, policy debates and themselves as a collective actor. Strategic narratives are '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' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). They are instrumental tools 'for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate' (Ibid.). The formation and projection of a coherent and persuasive narrative is challenging. Accordingly, strategic narratives 'are not necessarily analytical and, when not grounded in evidence or experience, may rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies' (Freedman 2006, 23).

Strategic narratives are mutually constituted by text and visuals. Although researchers indicate the significance of visual elements in the formation of strategic narratives (Crilly 2015; Hansen 2011); there have been few empirical investigations in the visual narration of the BRICS group (textual narration is examined elsewhere, see Van Noort 2017). It is the aim of this article to address the question: how are the strategic narratives of the BRICS constituted by visuals? And how does this visual construct impact the soft power potential of the BRICS group? The media sample include the summit logos, the logo of the New Development Bank (which is the high-profile success of BRICS's cooperation) and the organization of the BRICS Film Festivals in 2016 and 2017.

### BRICS and Soft Power

Analysis of formation and projection of strategic narratives can explain a country's 'soft power' potential (expanding on the work of Nye 1990). In other words, a 'strategic narrative *is* soft power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014, 71; italics in the original). Various academics have analyzed the soft power of the BRICS group by analyzing the 'output' of the individual member states (Gallarotti 2016; Stuenkel 2016). Stuenkel argues that '[e]very single country [of the BRICS] embraces its own particular values, and rather than adopting a genuinely new foreign policy strategy to enhance their soft power, policy makers tend to merely present their already defined policies in soft power terms' (2016, 360). Each country employs different strategies and resources; hence, the soft power of the BRICS group is the 'sum' of the different parts. Furthering this idea, Gallarotti coined the concept 'compound soft power' by using a macro-analytical lens to assess soft power activities (2016, 468). The advancement of soft power should not be understood merely as state propaganda or spin. Rather, it aims to enhance the socio-economic, cultural and political interests of these rising powers by attracting and persuading others (Nye 1990) with soft power resources such as culture, values and foreign policies.

Typical actions and policies that are attributed to the soft power potential of the BRICS countries are the organization of the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, the Confucius Institutes of China, the Russia Today news channel and India's Bollywood film industry. The soft power potential of the BRICS countries is therefore supported by its cultural and sports endeavors as well as through its media production (for an excellent exposition on

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this topic, see Nordenstreng and Thussu 2015). Soft power concerns itself with effective communication, which makes the participation of media industries crucial. In 2017, the 'Action Plan of Promoting BRICS Media Cooperation' was adopted (BRICS 2017b). In this official joint statement, the leaders pledge 'media cooperation, building a fairer international communication order, fulfilling the media's social responsibilities and obligations, and expanding and deepening exchanges and cooperation among BRICS media organizations' (BRICS 2017b). Media cooperation reinforces BRICS's mission to foster a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order. It challenges the asymmetric global media landscape with the intent to 'break the information monopoly and rebalance international public opinion' (BRICS 2017b). Yet the broadening of the media space through the cooperation of 'mainstream media organizations from the BRICS countries' to 'guide public opinion, resist distortion and speculation' (BRICS 2017b) reinforces the *struggle* in which the formation and projection of strategic narratives come about. Taking into consideration this narrative environment of sports, culture and media events, the BRICS group seeks to advance its soft power potential together through visual narration.

## BRICS Logos

Since the first BRIC summit in 2009 (then without South Africa), the four rising powers projected catchy summit logos. The conceptualization of the logo developed over the years into iconic and colorful designs. The 2010 summit logo used four colors for the four letters of BRIC: Brazil is green, Russia is blue, India is orange, and China is red. The inclusion of South Africa in 2011 is visualized with the color yellow. The 2011–2017 summit logos continuously adopt the five bright colors for the creation of a familiar design. The only deviation is the Russian logo in 2015. The complementary colors of the well-designed logos reinforce the vision of 'complementary cooperation' between the rising powers, despite their much-debated differences.

## Selection of BRICS Summit Logos



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The summit logos draw on cultural signifiers, while reproducing the brand of the host country. For example, the BRICS 2016 logo is shaped in a lotus, which is one of the national symbols of India. A design competition for the BRICS 2016 logo was put in place in anticipation of India's forthcoming chairmanship of the BRICS in 2016

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(Government of India 2015). Pursuing BRICS's commitment to 'inclusive participation,' a design of a local artist in Mumbai was chosen. In the words of India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj: 'Painted in the Brics colours, and symbolizing India's national flower, this logo encompasses the Brics spirit and will grace all our events across the year' (The Telegraph Calcutta 2016). The design of the BRICS 2016 logo presents a continuity of earlier imagery, but is nevertheless a contested visual image for the politicization of the symbol. Correspondingly, the frequency of the word 'Russia' in the 2015 BRICS logo (5 times) is rather unsubtle and reinforces the idea of a Russia-centric BRICS agenda. A positive 'brand equity' of the BRICS logos is therefore not an outcome of an easy communication process; rather, it requires a 'consistent, coordinated and unbroken stream of useful, noticeable, world-class and above all *relevant* ideas, products and policies' (Anholt 2010, 10; italics in the original).

Place branding is visible in some of the BRICS logos. The chairmanship of the annual summit rotates each year, which provides an excellent opportunity for the member states to raise the profile of a major city/metropolis. Symbolism is found in the BRICS 2017 China design in its branding of the host city, Xiamen. According to an official statement:

The main component of the 2017 BRICS Summit Logo resembles both full sails and a rotating earth, painted in 5 colors representing the 5 BRICS countries. The symbolism is two-fold: BRICS countries breaking the waves in the same boat towards a brighter future; and BRICS playing an important role in global political and economical (*sic*) affairs. The Logo brings out the theme of the Summit "BRICS: Stronger Partnership for a Brighter Future", and brims with the distinct marine culture of the host city Xiamen. (BRICS 2017a)

The sail and rotating earth draw attention to a changing world in which these five emerging powers imagine themselves as driving actors. The past, the present and the future is interlaced into one logo, corresponding to the time-dimensionality of strategic narratives. The logo depicts the *ancient* Chinese calligraphic style, the *present* is marked by the year '2017,' and the envisioned *future* is symbolized in the sails that rotate the earth, representing BRICS's aim to 'mark the twenty-first century.' It resonates with the advice that a 'good strategy doesn't just draw on existing strength; it creates strength through the coherence of its design' (Rumelt 2011, 9). Narrative coherency is constituted by connecting the past, the present and the future into one symbol.

## BRICS Summit Logo 2017

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In the 'Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership' adopted at the BRICS summit in 2015, connectivity is a key theme. Accordingly, 'connectivity should be strengthened in a comprehensive, integrated and systematic way in key areas including policy coordination, infrastructure connection, trade, financial integration and people-to-people contacts' (BRICS 2015, II.7). The strategic theme of 'connectivity' is celebrated in the wireframe logo of the New Development Bank – the high-profile success of the BRICS group. The logo aims to communicate its,

two fundamentals – the triangle of sustainable equilibrium and the propeller of change. The wireframe symbolizes infrastructure while green embodies sustainability. The continually changing form represents speed, agility and innovation. (NDB 2017)

'Sustainable equilibrium' and 'propeller of change' are two tenets that reinforce the mutual constitution of stable and progressive narratives. According to Gergen and Gergen's classification: 'Stability narratives are favored by the common desire for the social world to appear orderly and predictable; progressive narratives offer the opportunity for people to see themselves and their environment as capable of improvements' (2001, 175). The wireframe logo signifies the dialectic of stability and development.

## Image of New Development Bank Logo

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## BRICS Film Festivals

A second type of visual narration is mediated through the BRICS Film Festivals, held in New Delhi, India in 2016 and in Chengdu, China in 2017 (BRICS Film Festival 2016; 2017a). The film festival in China presented the opening film *Where Has Time Gone* (2017), consisting of five short stories, which captured the social and environmental challenges in the BRICS countries. This movie is a unique case of interrelating different narratives about the five emerging countries in a feature-length co-production (Go Chengdu 2017). 'Time', the theme of the co-production, juxtaposed the upward and positive storyline of the five emerging market economies, for a more contested narrative. The film draws attention to the social and environmental challenges that economic growth perpetuates. It represents a dialectic of change and continuity, reinterpreting the 'synergy of affects – interactions (and possible intensifications) between hopes, desires, and anxieties – concerning the past, present, and the future as these countries experience significant transformations' (Li and Marsh 2016, 2980). The visualization of this *struggle* interconnects the BRICS' peoples and legitimizes in the subjective sense the ideas and values that are present in these societies. In bridging the 'cultural divide' between the five rising powers, a press release stated that the 'BRICS Film Festival would commemorate and showcase the soft power of this group of actions through cinema, art and culture' (BRICS 2016b). The film festivals aim to soften the dramatic rise of these emerging countries by providing a platform for engagement, through knowledge-sharing and encouraging economic partnerships. This type of intra-BRICS cooperation endorses the 'connectivity' theme, as envisioned in the group's strategy.

Although the soft power angle of the film festivals is projected as 'coherent', tensions within the media texts may undermine the positive soft power potential. The opening film, for example, questions the sustainable impact of

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economic growth. The Brazilian contribution, *When the Earth Trembles*, tells the short story of a 'reservoir dam owned by a mining company collapsed, resulting in an avalanche of mud that destroyed several towns in the State of Minas Gerais in Brazil, and caused many to become homeless' (Go Chengdu 2017). The collapse of the mining dam owned by the Brazilian mining giants BHP Billiton and Vale instigated the crisis in this short story (Phillips 2015). These mining giants are both the protagonists of the economic success story of Brazil, as well as portrayed as 'antiheros' for their direct or indirect role in social and environmental degradation. The movie embedded BRICS's mission for a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order in a narrative environment of contested practices which makes the visual narration more 'truthful' and coherent (although a complete 'truthful' political narrative is never possible, see Shenhav 2006).

The BRICS Film Festivals presented an excellent case for nation branding. In comparison to the plain name of 'BRICS Gold Medals' in 2016 (BRICS 2016a), the 2017 programming granted the best movie, director and actor with 'Panda Awards'. An official statement stated that the '[h]onors at the BRICS Festival this year will be named 'Panda Awards' to signify the heritage in the beauty of cultures and the concept of mutual assimilation and mutual appreciation' (BRICS Film Festival 2017b). The panda bear, which is one of the national symbols of China, is not neutral. With its vision of 'mutual assimilation' and 'mutual appreciation', the award disregards the narrativized tensions between the countries. Evidently, there is also 'mutual distrust' among the rising powers, i.e. mounting from border conflicts and economic expansion politics, as there is aspired 'mutual assimilation'. Language does not necessarily smoothen out intra-BRICS conflicts. However, the 'Panda Awards' also presented an excellent opportunity for the BRICS to break the 'Hollywood pattern', taken into consideration that 'filmmakers at the festival have overwhelmingly stood behind the idea that BRICS should expand its influence to culture rather than simply focusing on economics' (Li 2017). Therefore, in multiple ways, the visual strategy of the 'Panda Awards' pays dividend for that it reconstitutes the underlying ideas and mission purpose of the BRICS.

## Conclusion

This article assessed the visual constitution of the BRICS strategic narrative and its influence on the group's soft power. The evaluation included both the formation and projection of media texts as well as intra-BRICS media coordination. The analysis of the logos draw attention to nation branding and place branding, while the BRICS Film Festivals presented unique case studies for analyzing the representation of socio-economic and political struggles in these countries. 'Connectivity' and 'time' are two important themes in BRICS's visual communication and coordination. The proactive formation and projection of strategic narratives empowers the BRICS group in the 'battle of narratives' to give meaning to the international order in a complex global media landscape. While empowered, the impact of the visual narratives is restrained because of its narrative environment of institutional, material and symbolic practices. Further research might explore the causal relation between BRICS's visual narration and the perception among domestic and international audiences of the BRICS group.

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