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Responsibility, Ideology, and Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of BRICS' Countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) discursively represent historical and future climate responsibilities in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and explores the underlying ideological and identity dynamics.

Methodology: This study employs the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, particularly the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough, which involves describing the textual features, interpreting how responsibility claims are constructed, and explaining the relations between discursive patterns and ideological stance as well as identity formation. The data consist of 5 NDCs documents submitted by BRICS countries to the UNFCCC.

Findings: The results show that the BRICS countries employ foregrounding/backgrounding strategies in framing historical responsibility via highlighting developed countries' historical emissions while downplaying their own, though with nuanced national variations, and modalization/modulation in articulating future responsibility, where divergent use of modal verbs and evaluative languages signals varying levels of ambition and priorities. These strategies reveal a shared equity-anchored ideological stance rooted in the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities (CDDR)," yet tensions between collective identity and individual national identity persist, as reflected in varied future commitment discourse.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: This study contributes to understanding BRICS' role global climate governance, highlighting their dual position as equity advocates and pragmatic actors navigating collective and national imperatives. It also suggests that international climate negotiations should recognize the divergent yet equity-centered discursive strategies adopted by BRICS countries, and create more flexible institutional arrangements that accommodate both collective climate ambitions and national developmental constraints

Keywords: *BRICS, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), Critical Discourse Analysis, Climate Responsibility, Collective Identity*

1. Introduction

Climate change has become one of the "defining global challenges" that threatens food security, coastal resilience, and ecological stability (IPCC, 2023). In response to this global crisis, a series of landmark frameworks have been established to coordinate international climate governance, including the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and mostly notably, the 2015 Paris Agreement. At the heart of the Paris Agreement is the requirement for Party countries to submit Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which outline mitigation targets, adaptation strategies, and implementation plans tailored to their domestic conditions, vulnerabilities, and development realities, with the joint aim of limiting global temperature rise to well below 2°C. As such, NDCs are taken as formal expressions of national climate commitments and represent the shared efforts of the international community to address global warming.

Substantial literature approach NDCs with a focus on the ambitions of emission reduction pledges, the feasibility of implementation, and the gap between stated targets and action. For example, assessments by UNEP (2023) and Climate Action Tracker (2018) highlight the "ambition gaps," noting current commitments are insufficient to limit warming to 1.5°C (Rogelj et al., 2016; Hare et al., 2017). While such empirical analyses provide valuable insights into national climate performance, they often overlook a critical dimension that NDCs are not merely technical documents to communicate material commitments, but discursive sites where nations negotiate interests, construct self/other identities, and articulate competing visions of climate justice (Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017; Mills-Novoa & Liverman, 2019). This also mirrors the current reality of global climate governance: it is not a unified regime with shared goal and coordinated action, but a contested field rife with disagreement, ambiguity and uncertainty. At the heart of these tensions lies the enduring Global North-South divide, in which developed and developing countries are generally characterized as the most prominent opponents, clashing over the issues such as historical responsibility, burden-sharing, and the implementation of climate justice principles. For example, Zhu & Shang (2024) demonstrate that African countries strategically use NDC discourse to position themselves as non-villains, vulnerable victims, and conditional actors, thereby contesting dominant Northern framings of climate responsibility and constructing a collective Southern identity rooted in demands for climate justice and equitable burden-sharing. However, this binary framework has increasingly been disrupted with the rise blocs like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), who transcend the simple category of developing countries and assume a more active role in redefining power relations in global climate politics. While existing literature has primarily focused on the dichotomy between

developed and developing countries, relatively limited attention has been paid to these emerging powers, especially concerning their negotiation positions and ongoing identity construction.

To address this gap, this study adopts a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to examine how climate responsibility is discursively represented in BRICS countries' NDCs, and how these representations reveal their ideological stances and contribute to the formation of a collective identity. This research aims to illuminate the role of discourse in shaping emerging economies' agency within global climate governance and the potential for transnational coalition-building.

2. Climate Responsibility

Climate responsibility lies at the normative and political core of global climate governance, which refers not only to the causal accountability for historical and contemporary greenhouse gas emissions but also the moral and practical obligations to mitigate climate change, support adaptation, and address loss and damage across national boundaries. Beyond the narrow environmental accountability, it also embodies principles of justice, equity, and collective action by defining who should bear the costs of climate action, how burdens should be distributed, and what duties states owe to one another and to future generations. As a foundational concept, climate responsibility structures the entire architecture of global climate governance, from the United Framework of Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to the Paris Agreement, shaping institutional design, negotiation dynamics, and national policy commitments. Without a shared understanding of climate responsibility, coordinated global action will become fragmented, and efforts to limit warming and protect vulnerability communities' risk will be undermined by competing national interests and normative disagreements.

Scholarly discussions on climate responsibility have evolved substantially from the initial focus on normative and empirical frameworks that prioritize ethical principles and quantitative burden-sharing to critical and discursive approach. Early research established core principles such as historical responsibility, the polluter-pays principle, and common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR), grounding climate obligations in ethical theory and empirical assessments of historical emissions, economic capacity, loss and damage, and vulnerability (Shue, 1999; Caney, 2005; Boyd et al., 2017; Betzold & Weiler, 2018; Weiler et al., 2018; Sovacool, 2021). These studies evaluate the fairness of national emission pledges and analyze the distribution of climate finance and technological support. For instance, Klöck et al. (2018) observe that many donor states implement the CBDR principle only selectively in their climate aid, prioritizing their own political and economic interests over recipient countries' vulnerability

and development needs, thereby undermining the fair distribution of climate responsibility. Later, critical political approaches expanded the discussion by linking climate responsibility to structural inequalities, North-South power relations, and the historical legacy of colonialism and industrialization (Roberts & Parks, 2007; Okereke, 2010; Holz et al., 2023; Herrera et al., 2025). In contrast, discursive approaches, including critical discourse studies, shifted attention to how climate responsibility is constructed, interpreted, and contested through language, narratives, and institutional texts (van Dijk, 2008). For example, Kiprizli (2022) argues that climate responsibility is not a fixed or objective category but a socially constructed norm shaped by strategic framing, identity politics, and struggle over global authority. This discursive turn reveals that competing definitions of responsibility reflect deeper conflicts over geopolitical power, developmental sovereignty, and moral legitimacy in global governance.

These theoretical tensions are mirrored in real-world disputes between developed and developing countries over the interpretation and allocation of climate responsibility. Developed nations increasingly emphasize universal, shared responsibility and contemporary emission contributions, framing climate action as a collective goal imperative that requires comparable efforts from all major emitters while often downplaying historical accountability and formal commitments to financial and technological support. By contrast, developing countries insist on the centrality of historical responsibility and CBDR with respective capabilities, arguing that industrialized nations owe a moral and political debt due to their cumulative emissions and that climate action must not compromise the right to development and poverty eradication (Kiprizli, 2022). This divide is not merely technical but deeply normative: developed nations prioritize procedural uniformity and immediate mitigation outcomes, while developing countries stress distributive justice historical justice, and developmental sovereignty. Such contestation reveals that climate responsibility remains a deeply politicized concept, whose definition directly influences the distribution of costs, benefits, and power in the global climate regime. As geopolitical shifts continue, the discursive struggle over climate responsibility will remain central to shaping the legitimacy, effectiveness, and equity of global climate governance.

3. Methods

This study draws on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to unpack the discursive strategies of representing the historical and future climate responsibilities in the BRICS countries' NDCs. As an interdisciplinary paradigm that bridges linguistics, sociology, and political science, CDA centers on the dialectical relationship between language, power, and ideology and aims to uncover how discourse reproduce existing social inequalities by analyzing linguistic choices and their contextual embeddedness. At its core, CDA posits that discourse is

not merely a neutral tool for communication but a social practice—one that both reflects and shapes broader sociocultural structures, including power dynamics and ideological norms (Fairclough, 1995, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Specifically, this study adopts Fairclough's (1989, 1995) three-dimensional model as our analytical framework, which conceptualizes discourse as a unity of text, discursive practice, and social practice. This model enables a multi-layered analysis that connects micro-level linguistic features to macro-level social structures, providing a holistic lens to examine how BRICS countries discursively represent climate responsibility in their NDCs.

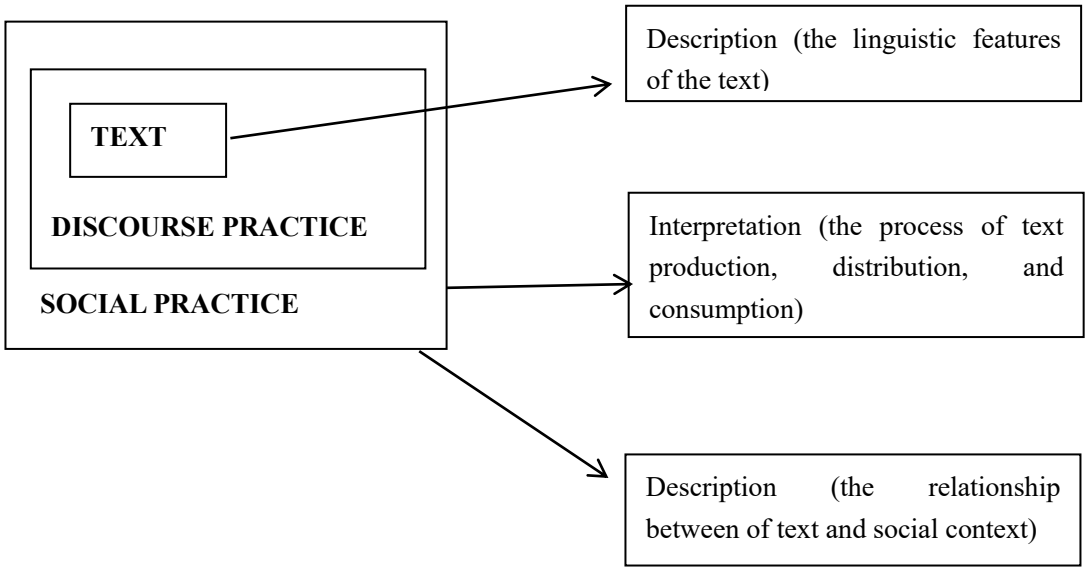

Figure 1 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

The first dimension "Text" focuses on describing linguistic features of the NDC texts. Here, analysis centers on formal linguistic features that shape meaning, including vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices. For instance, key terms related to climate responsibility (i.e., "common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)" , "historical emissions," "mitigation," and "adaptation") and expressions of modality (i.e., modal verbs like "must," "should," or "will") are examined to trace how responsibility is semantically framed. Besides, cohesive devices, such as pronouns ("we," "our," "developed countries") and conjunctions, are also analyzed to uncover how collective vs. individual responsibility is discursively constructed.

The second dimension" Discursive practice" shifts focus to interpret how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within specific sociocultural contexts. This involves examining intertextuality—the ways in which NDCs recontextualize prior climate agreements (e.g., the

UNFCCC or Paris Agreement) to legitimize their positions. For example, BRICS countries' references to the CBDR principle or historical responsibility claims are analyzed to trace how global norms are adapted or contested. Interdiscursivity, the hybridization of discourses, is also explored to understand how responsibility claims are framed through overlapping ideological lenses (e.g., framing climate action as a "developmental priority" vs. a "universal obligation").

The third dimension "Social practice" situates discursive practices within broader institutional and geopolitical structures. This involves contextualizing NDC discourse within the Paris Agreement framework, which mandates voluntary yet politically binding commitments, and emphasizes equity and differentiated responsibilities. Analysis also considers BRICS' positioning as emerging economies, examining how their discourse negotiates North-South power asymmetries—for instance, by invoking historical emissions of developed nations or emphasizing capacity constraints—to legitimize their own responsibility claims. By linking textual features and discursive strategies to these macro-social contexts, this dimension reveals how NDCs function as sites of ideological contestation in global climate governance.

In practice, analysis proceeds iteratively across these three dimensions. First, textual features are systematically coded (e.g., using qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti to identify patterns in key words and modality). Second, intertextual and interdiscursive links are mapped to interpret how responsibility claims are constructed through engagement with prior discourses. Finally, these patterns are explained in relation to BRICS' institutional roles and geopolitical interests, revealing how their NDCs discursively represent climate responsibility and contribute to the formation of a collective identity. This multi-layered approach ensures that linguistic analysis is grounded in broader social realities, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how discourse shapes and reflects power dynamics in global climate politics.

This framework is suitable for this study as it moves beyond surface-level policy commitments to unpack the ideological and power-laden dimensions of climate responsibility discourse. By integrating micro-linguistic analysis with macro-social context, it enables an examination of how BRICS countries use language to construct convergent or divergent positions on climate action and how these positions may contribute to transnational coalition-building in global climate governance.

4. Results

Through systematic coding and textual analysis, we find that BRICS countries primarily employ two discursive strategies in representing historical and future climate responsibilities in their NDCs: foregrounding/backgrounding and modalization.

4.1 **Foregrounding/backgrounding in representing historical responsibilities**

Historical responsibility for climate change is a pivotal issue in global climate governance, as it involves negotiations over the attribution of cumulative greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and the distribution of obligations among nations (UNFCCC, 2015). In the NDCs submitted by BRICS countries, discussions of historical responsibility are primarily concerned with the framing of past emissions—whether attributed to their own industrial and economic development or to other nations—and the implications of such emissions for current climate action. Here, foregrounding/backgrounding are employed as the dominant discursive strategy by BRICS countries to construct narratives of historical responsibility.

Grounding, a key textual structural strategy, refers to the organization and presentation of text to construct potential meaning, which reveals how discourse producers implicitly convey their stance toward social actors or issues (Khalil, 2002). In narrative discourse, Hopper (1997) distinguishes between "foregrounding" (i.e., the core narrative events forming the skeletal structure of the text) and "background" (i.e., supportive material that does not advance the main storyline). This foregrounding-backgrounding continuum is fundamental to textual meaning, as it shapes which information is emphasized and which is downplayed (Khalil, 2002).

In climate discourse, BRICS countries adopt preset positions in their NDC texts, strategically selecting and framing information to foreground content intended for reader attention or to background details they seek to minimize. This selective emphasis reconstructs "discourse reality", guiding audience interpretation by highlighting certain narratives and obscuring others.

Analysis reveals that BRICS countries consistently foreground the historical responsibility of developed countries while backgrounding their own historical emissions. Among the five nations, China, Brazil, and India explicitly address historical responsibility for climate change, whereas Russia and South Africa do not engage explicitly with this issue. For example, in Brazil's NDC,

> Most of the current concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is a result of emissions that have taken place since the Industrial Revolution (the post-1750 period). Current generations are bearing the costs of past interference with the global climate system, resulting from human activities and consequent greenhouse gas emissions, primarily by developed countries, during the last two and a half centuries (Brazil).

In this Extract, Brazil explicitly asserts that current atmospheric greenhouse gas concentration are "the result of emissions has taken place since the Industrial Revolution",

thereby framing historical responsibility as lying with industrialized countries. It further specifies that these emissions were "primarily by developed countries", directly attributing historical responsibility for climate change to the developed countries.

Similarly, India also frames the Industrial Revolution as the root cause of current climate problems through the causal phrase "has resulted in," emphasizing that cumulative greenhouse gas emissions since this period have directly led to global warming. It further argues that even after the adoption of the UNFCCC, the "tepid and inadequate response" of developed countries has aggravated the crisis, creating "an ambition gap" that demands enhanced global action. Here, India not only attributes historical climate responsibility to the Industrial Revolution and developed countries but also criticizes developed nations for failing to implement their NDCs adequately, arguing they have not fulfilled contributions commensurate with their historical responsibilities.

> The cumulative accumulation of greenhouse gases (GHGs) historically since industrial revolution has resulted in the current problem of global warming. This is further compounded by the tepid and inadequate response of the developed countries even after the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and delineation of obligations and responsibilities. As a result, an 'emission' ambition gap has been created calling for enhanced global actions to address it .... (India).

As in the following extract, China also argues that greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the large-scale consumption of fossil fuels by developed countries since the Industrial Revolution. Besides, China employs the logical phrase "as a result" to foreground the cause link.

> Climate change is a grim challenge facing all mankind. Human activities since the industrial revolution, especially carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions from large-scale fossil fuel consumption of developed countries, have led to a drastic increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere. As a result, global climate change has been aggravated, posing a huge threat to global ecosystem security and socio-economic development of developing countries (China).

From the above analysis, it is evident that Brazil, India, and China consistently using two key terms, namely "Industrial Revolution" and "developed countries", to foreground a fact that developed countries bear primary historical responsibility for climate change. However, it is quite interesting that Russia and South Africa, the other two BRICS countries, have not explicitly addressed the historical responsibility of other countries in their NDC reports.

Beyond addressing the historical responsibilities of other nations, BRICS countries adopt different representation of their own historical emissions. Notably, India, Brazil, and South Africa engage with their domestic historical emissions in their NDCs, albeit through varied narratives, while China and Russia contextualized this information without providing specific descriptions of their own historical emissions.

In specific, India highlights its limited historical contribution by focusing on per capita emissions data. It notes, "Even now, when the per capita emissions of many developed countries vary between 7 to15 metric tonnes, the per capita emissions in India were only about 1.56 metric tonnes in 2010." Notably absent is India's status as a populous nation, a factor that distinguishes per capita carbon emissions from total emissions. By foregrounding per capita metrics, India constructs a narrative of minimal historical responsibility, downplaying the relevance of total cumulative emissions.

Brazil characterizes its historical contribution to global climate change as "small" and foregrounds its identity as a developing country in contrast to developed and industrialized nations (As a developing country, Brazil's historical contribution to the global problem of climate change has been small). However, Brazil provides no supporting data or specific figures on its historical carbon emissions, leaving this claim underexplained. By omitting concrete metrics, Brazil effectively backgrounds details of its own historical emissions, reinforcing the narrative of limited responsibility through categorical identity rather than empirical evidence.

South Africa just addresses its historical emissions in a single sentence, framing its climate action within a transition narrative: "...ensuring that on one is left behind as we move from a high GHG emission, low employment pathway to a low emission, climate-resilient and job-rich pathway, ...". Notably, this statement emphasizes the country's current "low emission pathway" while only briefly acknowledge its past "high GHG emission" phase. By foregrounding its ongoing transition to a sustainable pathway and contextualizing historical emissions as a prior state being actively addressed, South Africa shifts focus to its present and future climate efforts, effectively backgrounding explicit discussion of historical responsibility.

4.2 Modalization/Modulation in representing future responsibilities

Guided the principle of equity enshrined in the Paris Agreement, all countries are obliged to demonstrate ambition and outline future plans for adaption and mitigation. Yet, this articulation of future responsibility varies across nations, shaped by distinct national circumstances and capacities. This is mainly achieved by the discursive strategies, i.e., modalization and modulation.

The modality system is mainly concerned with the extent to which a speaker assumes responsibility for a proposition. It describes whether the speaker expresses views in a subjective or objective, explicit or implicit manner. Modal meanings can be linguistically manifested through modal verbs, adverbs, or adjectives in the propositions concerning future climate responsibilities. The varying value connotations of modal verbs specifically reflect how each each country perceives its future responsibilities, thus serving as a window to probe into their distinct interpretations of climate obligations ahead.

Table 1 presents the frequency of modal verbs employed in the NDCs of the five countries, while Table 2 provides statistical data on the total word tokens of each country's NDC for contextual reference.

Table 1 Frequencies of Modal Verbs in NDCs

Value	Modal verbs	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
High	Must	1	0	7	10	3
	Will	26	12	38	219	102
Median	Would	1	0	25	3	1
	Should	1	0	7	10	15
	Can	3	0	7	8	6
Low	May	5	1	4	6	9
	Could	1	4	4	1	1
	Might	1	0	0	1	0
Total		39	17	92	258	137

Table 2 Word tokens in NDCs

Countries	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Word tokens	4271	5352	12296	25525	14630

Notably, whether measured by absolute frequency of modal verbs or the relative proportion relative to total word tokens, China exhibits the highest frequency of modal verb usage, followed by South Africa and India. Brazil and Russia, by contrast, have the lowest frequencies.

In addition, across all five countries, the use of high-value modal words is relatively limited Russia, for instance, does not use high-value modal verbs at all. By contrast, median-value modal verbs are used extensively, with China's NDC, in particular, recording a striking 219 instances of the modal verb "will". This pattern shows each government' attitude, resolve, and commitment to

addressing future climate challenges, conveying responsibility and obligation. However, the choice of modal verbs also reflects a deliberate balance in tone. For example,

> We must be committed to harmony between man and Nature; we must be committed to green development; we must be committed to systemic governance; we must be committed to a people-centered approach; we must be committed to multilateralism; and we must be committed to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (China).

As shown in above extract, China's NDC document employs high-value modal words "must" in succession to underscore its firm stance on balancing man-nature harmony, prioritizing green development, and adopting a holistic approach to climate governance. It also emphasizes its commitment to global solidarity, multilateralism, and upholding the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, reflecting a strong sense of purpose.

In addition to modal verbs, modal meanings can also be conveyed through adjectives or adverbs (Halliday, 2014), such as "be determined to", "be premise to", "be contingent upon" and "... is unconditional" , which often appear in the texts of China, India, Brazil and South Africa, but are absent in Russia's NDC.

China's NDC includes phrases like "China determined its actions to achieve the peaking of CO2 emissions around 2030 and making best efforts to peak early." The use of "determined" here conveys a strong determination and ambition in its carbon peaking commitment, signaling an intent that is resolute and non-negotiable—a high-value modal meaning. Brazil's NDC similarly employs such modal expressions, as such in "Regarding the issue of means of implementation, the Brazilian NDC remains unconditional...". While "unconditional" carries a literal negative connotation, in this context, it paradoxically conveys a positive high-value modal meaning—Brazil's commitment to implementing its NDC is unwavering and not subject to external contingencies, reflecting a strong sense of responsibility.

India and South Africa, in articulating their future climate actions, frequently employ conditional modal expressions that underscore the dependence of their NDC implementation on external support. These phrases, such as "be contingent upon", "be tied to", "be enabled by", and "be premised on", reflect a pragmatic acknowledgement of developmental constraints and the need for international corporation, as illustrated in the following extracts:

> The successful implementation of NDC is contingent upon an ambitious global agreement including additional means of implementation to be provided by developed country parties, technology transfer and capacity building following Article 3.1 and 4.7 of the Convention...

> our efforts to avoid emissions during our development process are also tied to the availability and level of international financing and technology transfer since India still faces complex developmental challenges (India).
>
> We continue to assume "that implementation and ambition will be enabled by finance and technology and capacity building support", as stated in the first NDC, and stipulated in the Paris Agreement....South Africa's NDC is premised on continued effective multilateral cooperation in the context of the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement, and the provision of support, both for implementation by developing countries. (South Africa)

Both India and South Africa use these conditional expressions to articulate a pragmatic stance—their NDC implementation is not only national commitment but also contingent on global solidarity, reflecting the interconnected nature of climate governance and the need for equitable support to address shared challenges.

In addition, the use of evaluative words or phrases is often considered as a key strategy of modulation, which reveals the views and attitudes they express on the future responsibility for climate change. In general, Brazil tends to use adjective superlatives or adverbs of high degree to evaluate the country's adaptation and mitigation actions to future climate change, while Russian texts often contain evaluative words such as "continue" to indicate the logic of continuing or strengthening the original. Unlike Brazil, India not only assesses its future responsibilities like that of Brazil, but India also tends to compare itself with other developed countries in its future responsibilities, hoping to receive support from all sides of the international community. In China's NDCs text, evaluative words are frequently used to express positive or firm attitudes to express the country's commitment and determination to address future climate change issues. And South Africa repeatedly uses evaluative terms for future climate justice in its formulation of future responsibilities to express its need for climate justice.

> The Brazilian NDC is one of the most ambitious in the world. Besides its targets, Brazil is one of the few countries that adopted a commitment for 2025 as well as 2030, ... (Brazil).
>
> Brazilian environmental laws are among the most advanced in the world (Brazil).
>
> Brazil has one of the cleanest energy mixes in the world (Brazil).

As shown in above extracts, Brazil used superlative expressions in evaluative expressions of its future responsibilities, emphasizing that its NDC report is the most ambitious in the world, and evaluating its own environmental laws as the most ambitious in the world. The advancement of environmental laws showed that Brazil attaches great importance to environmental issues, which

also indicated the adequacy of Brazil's fulfillment of its future responsibilities for climate issues and its cleanest energy structure also indicated Brazil's huge contribution to climate issues.

> The Russian Federation intends to continue its voluntary participation in the provision of international assistance to eliminate the consequences of natural disasters, ...In addition to the designated areas, the Russian Federation will continue, ...to strengthen capacity in developing countries through the training of qualified specialists in climatology, meteorology, hydrology and oceanography...the Russian Federation, realizing the importance of preserving the climate and ensuring sustainable development, plans to continue to assist developing countries in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, including mitigating anthropogenic impact on climate, and adapting to the consequences of its change (Russia).

As shown in above extract, there were numerous commitments to voluntarily support developing countries in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, although there was no mention of historical responsibility in the NDC report from Russia. Notably, Russia used the word "continue" when expressing its assistance to other developing countries. It not only expressed the information that Russia will continue to help developing countries in the future, but also that Russia already done it before, showing Russia's actively fulfilling attitude towards its country's future responsibilities.

5. Discussion

Based on the preceding analysis of BRICS countries' discursive strategies in representing historical and future climate responsibilities in their NDCS, this section proceed to interpret these patterns through the lens of Fairclough's three-dimension model, focusing on two core dimensions of discursive practices. First, it unpacks the ideological underpinnings of these strategies to reveal how BRICS' articulation of climate responsibility is anchored in a shared commitment to equity. Second, it explores the tensions inherent in identity construction by examining how BRICS navigates the interplay between forging a collective identity as a coalition and asserting distinct national identities shaped by divergent priorities.

4.1 Equity-anchored ideological stances in BRICS' climate discourse

Paris Agreement, as the structural regime of current global climate change governance, explicitly mandates implementation "to reflect equity and the principle of common yet differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances"(Article 2). Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), formulated under this framework, serve not only as policy documents but as discursive sites where countries articulate

their ideological orientations toward climate justice. Language, as a social practice, does not exist in isolation; texts within a shared thematic domain, such a the NDCs of BRICS countries, are interconnected through underlying ideologies, reflecting shared or contested visions of equity.

Across BRICS, a dominant discursive pattern emerges in how historical climate responsibility is constructed: collectively, these countries foreground the historical emissions of developed countries while backgrounding their own, rooted in the principle that climate justice must account for differentiated historical contributions. However, this strategy manifests with subtle variations, shaped by each nation's unique historical, political, and developmental context.

Brazil, India, and China explicitly emphasize the historical responsibility of developed countries, particularly industrialized nations, as the primary driver of climate change. Their NDCs directly link current climate crisis to the unconstrained emissions of the Global North during its industrialization, underscoring that these countries "benefited from decades of carbon-intensive growth"(China's NDC). India further amplifies this by contextualizing historical emissions through a per capita lens. By constrasting its low per capita historical emissions with those of developed countries, it reinforces the inequity of holding developing nations equally accountable for a crisis they did not primarily cause. This framing aligns with their self-identification as developing countries, for whom industrialization occurred later and at a smaller scale. By foregrounding developed countries' historical responsibility, they advocate not only for their own interests but for the broader Global South, asserting that climate justice demands recognition of differentiated historical contributions.

Russia and South Africa, however, adopt more cautious approaches to framing historical responsibility, reflecting distinct geopolitical and developmental constraints. As the successor to the Soviet Union, a former superpower with a heavy-industry-focused development model, Russia avoids direct confrontation with its own historical emissions. Instead, it reframes the narrative by distinguishing between "industrialized countries" (a category that implicitly includes the Soviet Union) and emphasizing post-Soviet de-industrialization, which has reduced it current emissions. This strategy sidesteps explicit blame while still aligning with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. South Africa, despite low historical emissions relative to developed countries, similarly refrains from highlighting developed countries' historical responsibility. This restraint stems from its acute need for international financial and technological support to implement climate actions; geopolitically, it also seeks to avoid exacerbating historical divisions between Africa and Europe, prioritizing collaboration over confrontation to secure critical resources for its transition.

While BRICS converge on equity as a core principle, their articulation of future climate responsibilities reveals nuanced ideological differences, shaped by national capabilities, priorities, and strategic goals. These differences are more evident in their use of modal expressions (indicating ambition) and the framing of domestic actions versus international support needs.

As previously analyzed, modal verb usage in NDCs serves as a linguistic marker of ambition toward future climate action. China, with the highest frequency of modal expressions (e.g., "must", "will"), positions itself as a leader in climate ambition; its emphasis on climate justice and assistance for other underdeveloped countries, reflecting in high-value modals, aligns with its ideological stance of proactive responsibility for global public goods (e.g., the "community with a shared future for mankind"). South Africa, following China, employs modal expressions to project ambition, balancing its need for international support with a commitment to domestic action, reflecting a pragmatic ideology that acknowledges constraints while seeking to maintain credibility as a responsible actor. India adopts a middle ground in modal usage, avoiding both over-ambition (which could limit its ability to secure international support) and uder-commitment (which might undermine its legitimacy); its focus on "survival emissions" versus "luxury emissions" (Goktug & Kostem, 2023) underscores an ideology that prioritizes development equity, arguing that poor countries should not be forced to forgo growth for emission reductions. Brazil and Russia, by contrast, use the fewest modal expressions, reflecting more cautious stances: Russia emphasizes emission reductions and technical assistance, while Brazil highlights ambitious commitments despite capacity constraints, suggesting ideologies that balance responsibility with realism, avoiding over-promising and domestic priorities (e.g., resource-dependent economies).

These variations in ambition are further shaped by how BRICS frame the balance between domestic action and international support. China and South Africa highlight proactive domestic mitigation and adaptation plans (e.g., China's carbon peaking target, South Africa's renewable energy goals) while acknowledging the need for global cooperation, reflecting an ideology of "shared but differentiated responsibility" where domestic ambition is paired with calls for equitable support. India, by contrast, frames future action as contingent on international financing and technology transfer, emphasizing that development needs (e.g., energy access for a large population) must precede aggressive emission reductions, reinforcing its ideological commitment to equity as "development-first" climate action. Brazil and Russia, meanwhile, focus on resource-based strengths (e.g., Brazil's forest conservation, Russia's renewable energy potential) to frame future responsibilities as aligned with national interests, reflecting a pragmatic ideology that links climate action to economic sustainability.

Overall, equity emerges as the foundational ideological principle uniting BRICS countries in their climate discourse. They collectively critique the inequity of current climate governance where developed countries, despite their historical emissions, often demand undifferentiated action from he Global South. Through discursive strategies such as foregrounding historical responsibility and calibrating modal ambitions, BRICS articulate a vision of climate justice that centers "common but differentiated responsibilities." Nuanced differences, shaped by each country's context, reflecting pragmatic adaptations of this core ideology: China's proactive leadership, India's focus on development equity, South Africa's collaborative pragmatism, and Brazil/Russia's resource-based realism. Together, these strategies represents a collective stance as advocates for equitable climate governance, challenging the status quo while asserting their role as key actors in shaping global climate action.

5.2 Tensions between national identities and an emerging BRICS collective identity

Discursive representations of climate responsibility are not merely descriptive; they actively contribute to shape identity formation. Collective identity, as Buzan (1993) argues, emerges through processes of in-group association (shared characteristics) and out-group differentiation (distinctiveness from others). In international relations, this concept extends beyond nations to groups of states, where a "joint identity" may coalesce shared norms, interests, or strategic goals (Hoschstetler & Mikoreit, 2014). For BRICS, climate discourse has become a critical site for constructing such a collective identity—one that positions the group as a distinct "third pole" in global climate governance, neither aligned with traditional developed countries nor with other developing nations (Hoschstetler & Mikoreit, 2015).

This collective identity is most evident in BRICS countries' discursive framing of historical climate responsibility. Across their NDCs, the five countries uniformly emphasize the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" enshrined in the Paris Agreement, foregrounding the historical emissions of development countries as their primary driver of climate change. This shared stance reflects a strategic alignment: by collecting holding developed nations accountable fro their industrial-era carbon footprints, BRICS positions itself as a champion of equity for the Global South. Notably, all five countries outliers and to consolidate solidarity with other developing nations. This discursive move reinforces their collective claims to differentiated treatment under international climate frameworks, distinguishing them from both the emission-heavy Global North and less economically powerful developing states.

Hochstetler & Milkoreit (2014) note that such a collective identity—rooted in shared opposition to undifferentiated climate obligations—can "unlock stalled negotiations" by creating

new normative space for emerging powers. In a global climate regime long dominated by a binary "rich vs. poor" narrative (Goktug & Kostem, 2023), BRICS' collective framing challenges Western-led discourse, asserting a more nuanced vision of equity. This shared ideological commitment to historical accountability has thus become a cornerstone of their collective identity, enabling them to act as a unified bloc in international negotiations.

Yet collective identity in BRICS is not a simple aggregation of member states' interests. As individual countries with distinct developmental priorities, resource endowments, and geopolitical goals, their discursive strategies for framing future climate responsibilities reveal tensions between collective solidarity and national self-interest. These tensions are most visible in how they articulate domestic mitigation commitments, international support needs, and strategic positioning in global climate politics.

While all BRICS countries acknowledge climate change as a global crisis, their approaches to future mitigation reflect individualized priorities. China, for instance, employ high-frequency modal expression (e.g., "must", "will") to project ambitious targets (e.g., carbon peaking by 2030), framing itself as a proactive leader in climate action—a stance aligned with its broader goal governance leadership. Brazil, too, emphasizes unconditional commitments and renewable energy achievements (e.g., forest conservation) to cultivate an image of environmental stewardship, seeking to enhance its influence in Latin American and global climate forums. Russia, by contrast, downplays modal intensity, focusing instead on post-Soviet de-industrialization and technical assistance to other states, reflecting its strategic emphasis on energy security and geopolitical neutrality. South Africa balances conditional commitments with calls for international support, navigating its dual identity as an African leader and an emerging economy with limited resources.

India stands apart in this spectrum, framing future responsibility as contingent on international financing and technology transfer, prioritizing "survival emissions" over aggressive mitigation. Its NDC emphasizes energy access for a large population, resisting pressure to adopt targets that might constrain development—a stance rooted in its national identity as a poverty-alleviating, development-focused state. These varied approaches, from China's proactive leadership to India's conditional pragmatism, reflect not just differing capabilities but also competing visions of what "responsible" climate action entails for each nation.

Tensions also emerge in how BRICS countries balance collective advocacy with individual pursuit of international support. South Africa and India, for example, soften critiques of developed countries' historical responsibility to secure financial and technological aid,

prioritizing national needs over collective rhetorical unity. Brazil, meanwhile, leverages its Amazon conservation efforts to position itself as a "climate champion," seeking to distinguish itself from other BRICS members and attract global partnerships. Russia, with vast energy resources, frames climate action as aligned with economic interests (e.g., renewable energy development), avoiding alignment with either Western or Southern blocs.

These individualized strategies risk fragmenting BRICS' collective voice. Unlike the European Union, which has institutionalized shared climate targets, BRICS lacks unified framework for reconciling national priorities with collective action. As a result, their discursive power in global negotiations is undermined by divergent messages: while China and Brazil project ambition, India and South Africa emphasize constraints, and Russia remains cautiously neutral. This dissonance weakens their ability to challenge Western dominance in climate discourse, perpetuating North-South polarization rather than transcending it.

The tension between BRICS' collective and national identities is not insurmountable. Climate change, as a transnational challenge, offers an opportunity to harmonize these identities by centering shared principles: equity, differentiated responsibilities, and the need for developed countries to provide support. By aligning their future responsibility discourses around these principles—even as they acknowledge national differences—BRICS could strengthen their collective identity as a bloc that bridges the Global North-South divide.

For instance, China's emphasis on "a community with a shared future for mankind" and Brazil's focus on "common but differentiated action" could be framed as complementary, not competing, visions. India's focus on development equity and South Africa's call for multilateral cooperation could further reinforce the group's role as a champion of inclusive climate governance. By prioritizing these shared normative commitments over individual strategic positioning, BRICS could transform tension into dynamism using their diversity to advocate for a more equitable global climate regime.

In conclusion, BRICS' climate discourse reflects a complex interplay between collective identity formation and national interest. Their shared framing of historical responsibility has laid the groundwork for a distinct collective identity as advocates of equity, but divergent approaches to future responsibility reveal lingering tensions. To enhance their discursive power, BRICS must navigate these tensions by emphasizing shared principles, coordinating positions on key issues, and presenting a unified front in global negotiations. In doing so, they can solidify their role as a transformative force in climate governance—one that redefines responsibility not as a burden, but as a shared, equitable endeavor.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Drawing on critical discourse analysis approach, this study has systematically examined the discursive strategies employed by BRICS countries in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to frame historical and future climate responsibilities, along with the underlying ideological and identity dynamics. Two key discursive strategies have been identified: regarding historical responsibility, BRICS countries use foregrounding and backgrounding strategies, emphasizing developed countries' historical emission and their role as the primary drivers of climate change. For future responsibility, they deploy modalization and modulization, with member states differing in commitment levels to balance global climate obligations against domestic capacities and priorities. Underpinning these strategies is a shared equity-anchored ideology centered on CBDR principle, which unites BRICS in claiming a distinctive "third position" in global climate governance. However, tensions persist between collective and individual national interests, as divergent future responsibility discourses weaken their unified stance relative to more cohesive blocs such as EU.

Based on the empirical findings of this study, several practical policy and theoretical implications can be proposed. In terms of practical policy implications, international climate negotiations should recognize the divergent yet equity-centered discursive strategies adopted by BRICS countries, and create more flexible institutional arrangements that accommodate both collective climate ambitions and national developmental constraints. Greater attention should be paid to how historical responsibility narratives and modalized commitment language shape domestic policy implementation and international credibility, so as to enhance mutual understanding between the Global North and emerging economies. For BRICS member states, aligning their discursive expressions of climate responsibility more coherently could strengthen their collective bargaining power and improve the consistency of their joint position in global climate governance.

Theoretically, this study aims to contribute to the existing scholarship by highlighting NDCs as a critical discursive site to advance understanding of how policy texts shape climate governance and also bridging discourse analysis and climate policy studies to show the value of linguistic analysis for unpacking policy narratives. It calls for more sustained dialogue between linguistically oriented discourse studies and climate policy research, so that textual and discursive features can be systematically integrated into analytical frameworks of global environmental governance. Future research may also extend this approach to compare discursive constructions of climate responsibility across different regional blocs, thereby deepening scholarly understanding of how emerging economies act as counter-hegemonic actors and

reshape normative structures in global climate politics.

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