

Russia and the Narrative of BRIC

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Abstract

Currently, there is a lot of debate about “rising powers” challenging the existing global status quo. Within this debate, the BRIC thesis and, more recently, the BRIC summit often feature prominently. Although most analysts question whether Russia can be considered a “rising power”, Moscow has sought to promote the BRIC summit and thesis as one aspect of its wider attempts to ensure itself a voice in what it deems as a changing global order.

Introduction

The contemporary debate on the “rising powers” is increasingly becoming a defining element of the international system. One of the key ideas within this meta-narrative is that of the growth of the BRIC. BRIC is an acronym for four countries, Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Its widespread usage is associated to a 2003 Goldman Sachs Report, which asserted that these four countries’ economies would develop at a rapid rate, so that by 2050 they would have become the largest and most influential economies within the international system, alongside the US—hence breaking the US’s hegemonic role within the world economy. On the basis of this report, many analysts have extended this prediction of economic strength to a growth in political influence for the BRIC, and indeed a consequent alteration in the geopolitical and normative balance of the international system.

As the BRIC thesis has been examined more closely, many have questioned the validity of the inclusion of Russia within the BRIC grouping, in particular because it is argued that the strength and capacity for growth of the Russian economy is not comparable to those of China, India and Brazil. However, whether or not Russia can objectively be characterized as a “rising power”, the narrative surrounding BRIC continues to hold prevalence within the international system, a phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed in Moscow. Under both Presidents Putin and Medvedev, Russian foreign policy has sought to make use of this narrative as a mechanism for projecting Russia’s image as a major international player and asserting aspirations of great power status.

Russia and an Emerging New World Order

Under Putin and Medvedev, Russia has increasingly sought to portray itself as a “Great Power”. Whilst the financial crisis of 2008 may have demonstrated Russia’s vulnerability to external economic developments, the hollowness of its internal economic growth and its precarious over-reliance on hydrocarbons, this has not deterred the Russian leadership from attempting to place Moscow at the heart of key developments and

debates on the global stage. To this end, since 2008/9 a subtle change in strategy is evident in Russian foreign policy, with more emphasis placed on asserting Russia’s national interests, not through hostility to other actors, but within the regime’s wider rhetoric about modernisation and revitalizing of external relations. Therefore, at least rhetorically, Russian foreign policy has focused on re-building its key international relationships, as witnessed by its attitude towards the “reset” of relations with the US under President Obama and the proposal for a new security strategy with Europe. Moscow has also continued to focus on building stronger relations with its CIS allies, for example through the creation in July 2010 of the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and the current preparations to convert this into a Single Economic Space, efforts to develop the CSTO, improving relations with Ukraine under Yanukovich.

Beyond Russia’s traditional focus on the CIS, US and Europe, the wider global debate revolving around a changing *balance-of-power* within the international system from West to East has also triggered more focus on its relationships with countries on its Eastern flank. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian–Chinese relationship has been slowly improving, and since the start of the 2000s has been characterized by both Moscow and Beijing as a “strategic partnership”, a recent product of which was the opening of the Skovorodino–Daqing oil pipeline. Russia has also sought to engage with other Asian countries, with the second ASEAN–Russia summit held in December 2010. In addition, in recent years Russia has also sought to engage or re-engage with other regions of the world, particularly South America (see Koval article in this RAD), the Middle East (see RAD 83), and, to some extent also, Africa (see RAD 83).

Therefore, a more diversified Russian foreign policy has been evident in recent years. This slight alteration in course is driven by the view that Russia needs to act to ensure it maintains a voice within the international system. The Russian leadership considers that the existing world order is changing with new players emerging

as significant and that this is a process that will occur regardless of whether Russia is a part of it or not, and that, against this background, it would be better to position Russia as an active part of this change, rather than to be excluded and isolated as a result of it. To this end, Russia is making a concerted effort to re-vitalise itself as an international player, not only by seeking to normalize its relations with its traditional allies, but also by attempting to position itself as within the group of the “rising powers” and as part of any new global institutional and normative arrangements.

Russia’s Participation in and Rhetoric on BRIC

As noted the term BRIC emerged from a company report, before evolving into a wider narrative hook for expressing a changing world order. The origin of the term is not lost on the Russian leadership, with Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, noting in April 2009 that it came “from statistical handbooks”. However, as with the expansion of its usage in general, he also outlined that from this limited and abstract context “a natural idea arose to meet and look at how each of our countries [BRIC] perceived this forecast and whether we had some common themes for discussion”. Indeed, Russia has sought to promote this term “from statistical handbooks” as the basis for constructing closer collaboration with these other “rising powers”, finding the other BRICs also open to this idea. The development of a framework for building some concrete collaboration to the BRIC concept has become a goal in Russian foreign policy. In 2010, Medvedev stated that “Russia would like the cooperation between the BRIC countries to become a major factor of multilateral diplomacy and to make a substantial contribution to promoting the nascent multipolarity and development of collective leadership by the world’s leading countries”.

The initial attempts to build a BRIC club began with moves to establish greater contact as a group on an informal level within the framework of the UN General Assembly, followed by discussion at a ministerial level around the G8 summit in 2006 and G20 in 2008, and a meeting of BRIC foreign ministers in Yekaterinburg, Russia in May 2008. These efforts were crystallized with the creation of the BRIC Summit, first held in 2009, and again last year, with plans to hold summits annually, with the 2011 edition to be held in China. At the end of 2010, South Africa was invited to participate in the BRIC summits.

From the Russian leadership’s perspective, the hosting of the first BRIC summit in Russia, on the back of the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Yekaterinburg in June 2009, was seen

as significant. At the second summit in Brasilia, President Medvedev commented to journalists that “there were doubts for a while as to whether the BRIC countries would actually become a group holding summits ... these are close countries, partners, with good strategic relations, but we did not hold summits, and so I was happy that when we did decide to hold our first summit it was in Russia”.

The Yekaterinburg summit was held in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, and its priorities centred on this crisis. The rationale, as noted in Russian official discourse, was that the BRIC meeting was an important stepping stone for reshaping the global economic landscape following the financial crisis, because, in line with the BRIC thesis, the BRIC represent the “largest economic growth and political influence centres among emerging economies”. Within this logic, it was suggested that alongside the development of “stronger collective and legal foundations of international life”, there is a need for a “fairer” system of international relations, one which takes into account the national priorities and interests of each of the BRIC countries and that is not determined solely by the West. An indication of this agreement about rebalancing the current institutional fabric of the economic and political international system came in the form of the discussion of alternatives to the US dollar as the world’s standard reserve currency—an issue prominently raised by Medvedev.

The second BRIC summit took place in April 2010 with the countries aiming to expand their dialogue, and to widen cooperation to other issues such as security and international affairs, climate change and food security. Nonetheless, discussions centred once again on overcoming the financial crisis, the strengthening of financial institutions and establishing a “fairer and more democratic international system in general” (Medvedev 2010). In relation to economics not only did the Russian leadership suggest that the BRIC countries could formulate a common position at the G20 in November 2010, but the four countries also drew up a Memorandum of Cooperation between state financial development and export institutions.

Russia’s approach towards BRIC should be seen within and as part of the wider process by which Russia is attempting to position itself as an important player within the international system, which includes efforts to revitalise its non-Western foreign policy vector and to place itself at the centre of the new clubs and organizations created around the world to mediate, channel and structure a shifting global order. As such, participation in BRIC has now entered into Russia’s wider foreign policy discourse and priorities. The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept notes that “Russia will make itself more fully

engaged in such formats as the Group of Eight and its dialogue with its traditional partners, the Troika (Russia, India and China) and the BRIC Four (Brazil, Russia, India and China), as well as by more actively using other informal structures and venues for dialogue". Thus, in spite of its lack of substance, the BRIC meeting is mentioned alongside other very prominent institutional elements to Russian foreign policy.

Russia's participation in BRIC has also been utilized to the end of strengthening relations with Brazil, and India and China. Outside of the showcase and grand rhetoric of the BRIC summit, references to the BRIC have also sprung up in other contexts, for example in the Russia–India–China Troika meeting in May 2008, or the joint article by Sergei Lavrov and his Brazilian counterpart, Celso Amorim, published in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* in 3 October 2008. For Russia, the BRIC summit also functions as a tool for strengthening its bilateral and trilateral relationships with the other members of BRIC.

The Role of BRIC in Russian Foreign Policy

At the present time, it seems that the idea of BRIC as symbolizing the premier group of "rising powers" will continue to have some, if a declining, resonance within the international system, even though it has been debunked by various analysts, who argue that while China, and to a significant lesser extent, India, could fulfil the BRIC prophecy, the possibility of the Russian economy doing likewise is remote. However, the significance of Russia's narrative on BRIC lies not in whether or not Russia qualifies as a "rising power" (by the usual

criteria used to assess this, it certainly does not), but in the way in which Russia utilizes this narrative as part of its wider foreign policy aims. The creation of the BRIC summit, has, at the very least, created a forum for these countries to meet and express an alternate voice to what many within these countries proclaim as the pro-Western existing arrangements for global discussion and governance. Many of the ideas expressed at the BRIC summits, coincide with those in Russian foreign policy, which is not surprising given that similar areas of common viewpoint are evident in Russia's bilateral relationship with China.

Against this background, the creation of the BRIC as a regular summit serves to include, at least in some geopolitical capacity, Russia within the grouping of those states seen as "rising powers". This is seen by Moscow as a major foreign policy success. If a change in global power is underway from West to East, by placing itself at the centre of hubs such as the BRIC summit and cultivating its relationships with the "rising powers" driving this transformation, Russia hopes to guarantee itself a stake and a voice in any reshaping of the institutional and normative fabric of the international system (if of course any such change does occur). This is not to say that Russia does not prioritize its relations with the West. It does, and Moscow also seeks to improve and cement positive relationships with all states in the West. In this way, Russia will have a role to play and a voice in both the established Western order and any emerging order led by the "rising powers".

About the Authors

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Further Reading

- Gilbert Rozman "Sino–Russian Relations in Triangular Contexts"; Alexandra Koval "Contemporary Perspectives and Trends in Russian–Brazilian Relations" in this issue of *Russian Analytical Digest* (*Russian Analytical Digest* 91)
- Vladimir Portyakov "Russian–Chinese Relations: Current Trends and Future Prospects"; Zhao Huasheng "Sino–Russian Relations 2009 to 2010: A Perspective from China"; Shoichi Itoh, "Sino–Russian Energy Relations: True Friendship or Phony Partnership?" in *Russian Analytical Digest* 73 (<http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=113103>)