



FROM BRIDGE TO BULWARK: THE EVOLUTION OF BRICS IN RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY

De puente a fortaleza: la evolución de los países BRICS en la estrategia global de Rusia

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Russia has been the driving force in pushing and shaping the narrative of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) since the group began to acquire a political identity in the mid-2000s. Russia's motivations for promoting BRICS, however, have evolved considerably over the last decade. While Moscow's initial goal was to use the group as a rhetorical device to strengthen Russia's bargaining position with the West, in the wake of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, BRICS has begun to symbolize for Russia a viable alternative to continued accommodation with the Western-led international system.

Russia, BRICS, identity, Ukraine Crisis, anti-Westernism

Rusia, BRICS, identidad, Crisis Ucraniana, anti-occidentalismo



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Rusia ha sido la fuerza motriz de la configuración y el fortalecimiento de la narrativa de los países BRICS (Brasil, Rusia, India, China, Sudáfrica) desde que el grupo comenzó a adquirir una identidad política a mediados de los años 2000. Sin embargo, los motivos de Rusia para fomentar los BRICS han evolucionado considerablemente a lo largo de la última década. A pesar de que la intención inicial de Moscú era emplear el grupo como un recurso retórico para fortalecer la posición de negociación de Rusia con el Oeste, tras la actual situación de crisis en Ucrania, los países BRICS han comenzado a simbolizar para Rusia una alternativa viable a la constante adaptación al sistema internacional liderado por Occidente.



The rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group is arguably one of the more interesting innovations in geopolitics in the last decade. Bringing together five continental powers with large populations and impressive growth rates, the group nonetheless often finds itself the object of ridicule and skepticism from international analysts who do not see common ground within the group for continuing cooperation. Yet to read Russian sources on BRICS, not only is the group interesting, it is “one of the most important geopolitical developments” (Lavrov, 2012, p. 1) of the twenty-first century. Russia, however, has a vested interest in emphasizing the power of BRICS, and not only because it is a member of the group. Russia has been the driving force in pushing and shaping the narrative of the BRICS since the group began to acquire a political identity. Its motivations for doing so, though, have evolved considerably over the last decade.

The evolution of Russia’s goals and attitudes towards the BRICS group is a microcosm of the larger issue that Russia’s place *vis-à-vis* the West, and indeed with regard to the international system more generally, has been unsettled for the duration of the post Cold War era. The discomfort has come from an ongoing internal struggle between a desire to engage with the international system while still maintaining complete control over domestic development and national identity. This is further complicated by an unfulfilled desire to play a leading role in the formation and administration of an already codified system in which the West is preeminent and Russia is not. Finally, a stable national identity, which could have mitigated the tension over how to engage internationally, has been elusive. Nearly twenty-five years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian national identity remains divided between identification with Europe and the (ideological) West and the idea of Russia as a civilization apart, required by virtue of geography and culture to follow its own developmental path.

This divide has produced a foreign policy approach that simultaneously attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the reigning system and position Russia as an alternative center of power, while also seeking to secure recognition from established status quo great powers. For most of its existence, BRICS has been a useful tool for Russia to deploy in balancing between those two objectives. Russia’s initial goal was to use the group as a rhetorical device to strengthen Russia’s bargaining position with the West. In the wake of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, however, BRICS has begun to symbolize for Russia a viable alternative to continued accommodation with the Western-led international system. Indeed, Moscow has begun to see BRICS not only as a source of leverage in the current international system, but as a basis and a model for a new system altogether.

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1. From BRIC to BRICS: a brief history

Before delving more deeply into the role of BRICS in Russian foreign policy and grand strategy, it is worth undertaking a quick review of the history of the group. The term “BRIC” (an abbreviation of Brazil, Russia, India, and China) originated in a 2001 analysis by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O’Neill entitled “Building Better Global Economic BRICs” (O’Neill, 2001). The goal of the paper was to identify the likely future leaders of the global economy, and was targeted primarily at investors. While O’Neill’s analysis did suggest that global growth patterns might eventually necessitate a reshuffling of the G7, he in no way intended his paper to have geopolitical consequences.

However, the idea took hold beyond the private sector in ways O’Neill never envisioned. Though he was not the first to notice the exceptional economic performance of the world’s largest sta-

tes, his acronym became the shorthand for both shifts in the global economic landscape and the presumed geopolitical rebalancing that would follow (Tett, 2010; Stuenkel, 2014a). It then became a banner under which those states themselves began to meet and coordinate. The first unofficial meeting of BRIC representatives took place with a meeting of deputy foreign ministers in 2005 (Andreev, 2013, p. 127). The following year, in what is normally hailed as the first official BRIC meeting, the foreign ministers of the BRIC countries met at the sidelines of the 2006 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Since 2009, the group has held regular independent summits at the level of heads of state. In 2011, South Africa formally became a member and BRIC became BRICS. This accession is notable not only for the change in acronym, but because the inclusion of South Africa, a state that would not qualify for membership based on O'Neill's original criteria, marks the completed transformation from O'Neill's "global economic BRICs" to a BRICS group with geopolitical goals and influence.

This transition from an economic to a political grouping was unexpected, and one of the side effects is that the question of how to define BRICS remains an ongoing concern of both the politicians engaged with it and the academics that study it. The official Russian term is *obedinenie* (association). "Group" is another term used frequently in both Russian and non-Russian literature, and is arguably a more neutral term than "association". Still others have spoken about BRICS as a "quasi-organization," a term as cumbersome as it is unhelpful. I shall for the most part speak just of "BRICS," with the understanding that these countries are coordinating in a way that makes it conceptually rational to speak of common goals and activities, but are not (yet) sufficiently institutionalized to merit a more formal designation.

There is one final point before continuing to the main analysis. One area of disagreement that complicates the study of BRICS is over the extent to which BRICS is at this point a political rather than economic undertaking. On one side of the debate are those who argue that BRICS is fundamentally about economics, and therefore the success or failure of the group will be determined by the countries' growth rates. On the other side are scholars who contend that BRICS has evolved beyond its initial acronym, and now has wider political basis and significance. I am of the latter group. Although most of the BRICS coordination happens within international forums dealing with economics – notably the G20 and the IMF – I argue that the goals are geopolitical because what is at stake is political control of the international financial system. Further, although coordination is now focused on international financial institutions, stated long term goals are wider, including, for example, expanding the United Nations Security Council. Finally, for Russia specifically, as I argue in more depth below, BRICS has always been primarily about politics.

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2. Russia's role in the formation of BRICS

Missing from the above narrative about the evolution of BRIC from economic to political is the critical role Russia played in effecting that transformation. It is not an overstatement, however, to assert that without Russia, the BRIC group would never have come together. Russian intellectuals were thinking about BRICS more as a political than an economic question from very early in the 2000s. In 2004, the Institute of Latin America of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ILA RAN) sponsored a conference about how the rise of the Giant Emerging Countries (GECs), and first and foremost the BRICs, could impact the creation of a new world order (Davydov & Bobrovnikov, 2009, p. 13; Bobrovnikov & Davydov, 2005, p. 4). While Brazilian

research centers were also beginning to engage with similar questions at around the same time, it was Russia that really pushed the project forward. This is most evident in President Vladimir Putin's initiative to bring the foreign ministers together at the 2006 UNGA. The proposal for a stand-alone BRIC summit also came from Russia, and the first summit was held in Ekaterinburg in 2009 (Stuenkel, 2014a, p. 91).

Beyond being the prime mover behind organizing meetings and summits, it is also clear that Russia had a strategic vision for how it wished BRIC to develop before the other partners. In advance of the Ekaterinburg summit, Russian political scientist and Duma member Vyacheslav Nikonov organized a meeting of scholars from BRIC countries to think about the future of the group (Nikonov, 2009). Russia wanted to institutionalize the group from the beginning, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is often credited as "the intellectual architect of the politicization of the BRICs platform" (Stuenkel, 2014b, p. 103). Further, while the other partners joined the grouping for economic reasons, Russia's motivations in pushing for meetings were primarily related to politics and security (Unnikrishnan, 2014). The combination of the early push for institutionalization and the alternative motivations for cooperation suggests both that Russia had a distinct narrative it wished the BRIC group to represent, and that it sought to control and shape that narrative in a way that served Russia's own international priorities.

3. BRICS and Russian Foreign Policy priorities

To understand the connection between Russia's national goals and the BRIC narrative it tried to promote, one need look no further than the internal review of foreign policy published in 2007. A comprehensive review of all elements of Russian foreign policy, the document declares that:

The role and responsibility of Russia in international affairs has qualitatively grown over the first decade of the twenty-first century. The chief achievement of recent years is the newly acquired policy independence of Russia. The time is ripe for conceptualization of the new situation, particularly at the doctrinal level. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007)

This is of critical importance for understanding how Russia initially conceived of a political BRIC. The group was intended to further the second goal (reshaping the doctrinal basis of international relations) by leveraging the new policy independence, meaning they would be able to conduct the foreign policy they wished without fear of repercussions from other actors (Zagorski, 2010, p. 32).

That Russia hoped to use BRIC to increase its weight in the international system is not a novel argument. Cynthia Roberts (2010, p. 42) has argued convincingly that Russia's BRIC diplomacy was aimed at creating a "power multiplier". The idea was to create a mechanism that could be deployed to increase Russia's impact in international forums and thereby renegotiate the reigning post-Cold War institutional settlement, with which Russia has never been satisfied (*ibid*). These goals are seen clearly in Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (Putin, 2007). They are also evident, with a slightly more conciliatory gloss, in the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, which was signed shortly after Dmitri Medvedev assumed the presidency (Roberts, 2010, p. 42).

Where previous analysis falls somewhat short is in defining precisely how Russia hoped to use BRICS as a power multiplier, especially since BRICS would seem at first to be a "second best" solution. As Roberts notes, while coordination with these other large emerging countries did

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give Russia a larger voice in some international organizations, it did not produce similar effects in Euro-Atlantic organizations, such as NATO or the G8, which is the prime locus of Russian dissatisfaction with the current system (Roberts, 2010). Further, associating with the BRICS countries is an imperfect fit with Russia's dominant national identity as a great power member of European civilization and the Global North (Panova, 2012). While the other BRIC countries are becoming more globally important, none has a firmly first world identity. Seen from this perspective, Russia's push to institutionalize BRICS seems, if not counter to strategic priorities, at least less immediately related.

It is important to remember, however, that although historically Russia's dominant national identity has been European, that is changing. In recent years officials have made a concerted effort to promote a "Eurasian" identity, which conceives of Russia as a unique civilization apart from both Europe and Asia, but linked to both. This is partially about stoking an increase in anti-Americanism for domestic political reasons, and partially a renewal of the long-standing debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles that has dominated Russian intellectual thought for over two centuries (Umland, 2012, pp. 30-34; Stent, 2007, p. 418). But while the official promotion of a Eurasian identity is linked most obviously to Russia's retreat from integration with the West, it also presages an effort at strategic positioning to increase Russia's power in both East and West. BRICS is the cornerstone of that effort.

Indeed, this is in many ways the key to understanding the strategic thinking behind Russia's efforts to bring the original BRIC countries together into a more formal grouping. As much as the effort to institutionalize BRIC was designed to give Russia (rhetorical) parallel options to further accommodation with the West, there was also a hope that the country could use its unique position as a member of both the G8 and BRIC to increase its influence in both (Grishaeva, 2012, p. 305; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). It is here that Roberts's theory about BRIC as a power multiplier needs to be extended: the aim was not just to gain influence in general international organizations, but was also specifically about looking for a way to position the country such that it could increase its leverage in those clubs with which it was most concerned. In addition to solving immediate economic and security concerns, therefore, BRIC also initially offered Russia another "shore" from which to build a bridge to Western institutions, in hopes that it could use its joint position and identity to increase its voice on both sides.¹

Finally, in addition to acting as a power multiplier, BRICS also served the purpose of dual soft balancing. By creating a forum stocked with powerful rising players that operated as an "alternative" to Western-led informal international institutions, Russia was able better to balance against Western hegemony. At the same time, BRICS also increased the country's engagement with China. There was a hope that this additional layer of institutional webbing (over the existing Shanghai Cooperation Organization and, nominally, Evgenii Primakov's "Strategic Triangle" of Russia, India, and China) would help manage China's rise such that it did not become too much of a problem for Russian interests.

Since it was meant to balance both sides, BRICS was also never intended as a full alternative to cooperation with either side. Despite early and persistent calls for institutionalization, it is unclear that Russia actually wished to follow through on those demands. This is underscored by the fact that BRICS diplomacy is run entirely out of the foreign ministry rather than the

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1 On whether or not this was a realistic hope, see Panova (2012).

Presidential Administration. It is true that under the Russian constitution the president has final authority over foreign policy, and the foreign ministry could not pursue initiatives without presidential approval. However, items higher on the presidential priority list are coordinated through the Presidential Administration rather than the foreign ministry² (Panova, 2014).

In addition, the “Concept of Participation of the Russian Federation in BRICS,” published by the foreign ministry in March of 2013, describes BRICS as part of the overall trend towards informal network diplomacy in international affairs (Kremlin, 2013). While the Concept also lays out a long-term goal of further institutional formalization of the BRICS association, most of the emphasis is on maintaining informal links and not institutionalizing to the point that it overrides bilateral relations. Indeed, one of the general pillars of Russian foreign policy is a preference for bilateral relations and a reticence towards agreements that would circumscribe the country’s sovereignty and foreign policy independence (Zagorski, 2010, p. 32).³ It seems clear, therefore, that although Russia wished to promote BRICS’ importance on the international stage, the country had no more desire to align fully with BRICS than it did to align fully with the West (Fortescue, 2014, p. 234).

4. Russia and BRICS after the Ukraine crisis

The desire to keep a distance from both sides changed after the precipitous decline in Russian-Western relations in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the ongoing unrest in Eastern Ukraine, and the increasingly punishing sanctions that the United States and the European Union have levied against Russia in response. All of a sudden, BRICS serves two very important functions for Russia, addressing both political status and economic necessity. Both of these functions, while evident from the beginning, have been sharpened by the present crisis.

The first function is political, and this may be the most important in the short term. BRICS countries have not supported Russia’s actions in Ukraine, but they have not condemned them either. Further, in response to rumored efforts by the Australian foreign minister to ban President Putin from the November 2014 G20 Summit, the BRICS foreign ministers issued a joint statement reminding observers that no G20 member has the authority to exclude another unilaterally (Cox, 2014; BRICS Foreign Ministers, 2014). This silence on the general issues combined with the mild rebuke of the G20 on the specific issue of Russia’s potential exclusion provides Russia with room to maneuver. Despite Western efforts to isolate Russia, the ongoing partnership and the agreements reached during the July 2014 BRICS summit in Fortaleza and July 2015 summit in Ufa, Russia, both offer compelling imagery supporting Russia’s contention that the United States cannot strip it of its powerful partners nor, with the new Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), access to capital.⁴

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2 See Lukyanov (2014, December 13), personal interview.

3 This is a common view among the BRICS countries.

4 The CRA is modeled on the Chiang Mai Initiative, and its main purpose is to provide assistance in the case of short term liquidity gaps. According to the terms of the agreement, each BRICS country has access to 30% of their contribution without preconditions. The remaining 70% is available only when the country is also under an IMF program. It is too soon to gauge how well the CRA will work in practice (or if it will work at all), but its creation does suggest that, at least in theory, Russia will have access to some amount of emergency lending that is independent of the West. For more on the CRA, see Ministry of Foreign Relations, Brazil (2014).

The (theoretical) access to capital leads to the second function: intra-BRICS trade and Russia's bilateral relations with the BRICS countries individually offer potential relief from the effect of Western sanctions, as well as from Russia's self-imposed ban on Western agricultural imports. The countries of Latin America, and especially BRICS partner Brazil, have cheerfully stepped into the void left by the ban on EU agricultural goods (Devitt & Caglayan, 2014). From the perspective of the Russian consumer this is not unmitigated good news in the short run; food prices are expected to rise as a result of the ban, and this will likely push inflation even higher as well (Rapoza, 2014). These negative effects are exacerbated by the December 2014 ruble collapse. Taking a longer-term perspective, though, the story may be somewhat more positive. The speed with which Russia was able to leverage its relationships with the BRICS to replace the banned items and the positive reception these overtures received suggests that Russia has willing partners towards whom to reorient its economy⁵.

These practical considerations have been bolstered by official rhetoric. Whereas previously Russian officials discussed BRICS as part of the overall "multivectored nature" of Russian foreign policy, speeches now are much more pointed and antagonistic (Lukyanov, 2014). Following the agreements reached at the Fortaleza summit, the Russian press declared that BRICS was "breaking the chains of the dollar" (Krestianinov, 2014). During his speech at the BRICS plenary session in Fortaleza, President Putin suggested a number of new initiatives that would bring cooperation to a qualitatively new level, including an energy association and joint use of Russia's GLONASS system (Putin, 2014). In his September 1, 2014 speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs, the official university of the foreign ministry, Foreign Minister Lavrov spoke of Russia's BRICS "allies" (Lavrov, 2014).

None of these are watersheds in and of themselves, and Putin's Fortaleza suggestions have been percolating for some time. In aggregate, however, they suggest that the deep-freeze in relations with the West following the crisis in Ukraine has propelled BRICS up the list of Russian foreign policy priorities, and that it now for the first time appeals to Moscow as a real alternative to the Western system. From thinking of themselves as a bridge between BRICS and the West, Russia is now attempting to position BRICS as a bulwark against further Western encroachment on their interests.

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5. The reaction of other BRICS and the potential implications of increasing Russian anti-Westernism

Russia does not execute its BRICS policies in a vacuum, and the responses of the other partners are critical for Russia's long-term success or failure to achieve its objectives in how it would see BRICS evolve. In the case of Russia's renewed emphasis on the importance of the BRICS group within its own foreign policy, the main question is the attendant anti-Westernism that has accompanied this renewal. This brings to the fore an issue with which the group has struggled since its inception: the role and degree of anti-Westernism in BRICS both as a motivator for cooperation and even sometimes a *raison d'être*.

⁵ As of April 2015, food exports to Russia from Latin America and the Middle East had increased, and Russian authorities were working to ease existing restrictions on, for example, Brazilian meat exports. However, this substitution has been insufficient, and food prices continue to rise. See: Stratfor (2015, April 23), "Russia's Impending Food Shortages", retrieved from <https://www.stratfor.com/image/russias-impending-food-shortages>

Anti-Westernism has been the elephant in the room since BRIC first began to coalesce as a political entity in 2006. It remains unresolved because of the competing and contradictory interests of the group. On the one hand, all of the BRICS have more investment in their relations with Western countries than they do with the other BRICS. Even though China is now the largest trading partner for both Brazil and South Africa, none of the BRICS countries features in China's list of top five trading partners, and all continue to conduct significant trade with both the United States and the European Union (Brancato, 2014; Vlaskin, Glinkina & Lenchuk, 2013, p. 318). These strong economic ties are one reason that BRICS documents are so careful to emphasize that the group is not directed at any third parties and is not an anti-Western bloc (BRIC Leaders, 2011).

There are also political reasons to temper any perceived anti-Western motivations. BRICS's overarching goal is to reshape global governance architecture such that they have a larger voice in existing institutions. Most of the members are evolutionary rather than revolutionary in their approach to the current system (Armijo & Roberts, 2014, p. 520; Panova, 2012). What this means in practical terms is that BRICS will need Western acquiescence and cooperation in order to achieve its aims. From that perspective, overt or alienating anti-Westernism, would be counterproductive (Unnikrishnan, 2014).

On the other hand, there is something inherently anti-Western in the group's initial coalescence. The beginnings of BRICS as a political idea is deeply entwined with the global discontent with the United States that began to emerge in the wake of the invasion of Iraq and everything that followed (Laidi, 2011, p. 2). Perhaps more importantly, there is an intrinsic Pareto optimality problem with the BRICS demands. The BRICS desire a reorganization of votes in international organizations (most prominently the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but elsewhere as well) so that voting weights better represent the current global distribution of economic capacity (Ünay, 2013, p. 84). However, in demanding that reshuffling, the BRICS by definition are demanding that the shares of other countries, mainly in the EU and the United States, decrease. The BRICS hope to gain power through others' loss of power. Whether or not their calls are fair, or rational, or should be heeded, there is no solution to the demand wherein the United States and/or certain EU member states are not geopolitically and geoeconomically worse off afterwards than they were beforehand.

The BRICS group therefore walks a very fine line with regard to its relationship with the West. It must be sufficiently oppositional in order to capitalize on (latent) anti-Western sentiment and dissatisfaction with the reigning system among developing countries. However, it cannot become so oppositional that it torpedoes either the collective goal of the BRICS group (reform but not revolution in the international system) or the national (economic) interests of BRICS member countries.

The ongoing standoff between Russia and the West makes this balancing act more delicate because of how it has affected Russia's calculus for participation within the group. Other BRICS countries understand that the Western sanctions on Russia are not an attack on either the BRICS group or the other member countries individually (Davydov, 2014). However, if those sanctions push Russian anti-Westernism to further extremes, and if BRICS continues to grow in importance on the Russian foreign policy docket precisely because it is a grouping of non-Western states and Russia pushes for BRICS statements to reflect that change, it would exacerbate intra-group tensions and knock the already precarious equilibrium further off balance.

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It is in some sense a question of degrees. As noted above, the BRICS (and others) have been happy to pick up the market share left by Western sanctions. BRICS as a group also tend to dislike economic sanctions as a tool of international politics (Laidi, 2011, p. 3). This suggests that there could be a certain amount of flexibility among the other BRICS partners in allowing Russia to make BRICS anti-Westernism more overt. However, if Russian rhetoric (beyond that intended for domestic consumption) goes too far, then it is likely that China and India in particular will push back (Unnikrishnan, 2014). Neither will countenance BRICS becoming an explicitly anti-Western alliance. The open question, therefore, is what the long-term effects of the split between Russia and the West will be on Russia's participation in the BRICS group and whether this crisis will prove the straw that finally breaks an already weak basis for cooperation, or instead will become the crucible that brings five strong rising powers into true accord.

6. Conclusion

In 2006, Dmitri Trenin published an article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Russia Leaves the West," in which he argued that, "Russia's leaders have given up on becoming part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centered system" (Trenin, 2006, p. 87). Since 2006 was when BRIC began to come together as a political entity, Trenin would seem to have been on the mark in his observation. However, a retrospective analysis suggests certain nuances. If in 2006 Russia was beginning to build its own solar system, to use Trenin's analogy, then this new system was at least adjacent to the Western one. Indeed, Moscow's goal was to strengthen its own hand through strategic cooperation with both old and new power centers.

This initial goal coincided with the goals of Russia's other BRICS partners. Although the group has always been something of a Rorschach test for its members, with each country having its own goals and rationale for participating, all used it as a way of maximizing their voice in the international arena without directly challenging the reigning hegemon. Russia has historically been the most willing to paint BRICS with an anti-Western brush, but it has also been cognizant of the limits of that approach. Within the Russian foreign policy consciousness, BRICS has been the symbol of an alternative to the West, but not more than that. This has made managing conflicting views on anti-Westernism within the group easier.

After the Ukraine crisis, however, that balance seems to have disappeared, at least from official formulations (expert views are more nuanced). Instead of Russia as the cord that connects the BRICS and the G8 together, and a willingness to curtail anti-Westernism within BRICS, the new image is of shackles being broken. BRICS has become Russia's battering ram against the old system. For now, at least, it seems Russia really has left the West. It remains to be seen to what extent BRICS will become part of that exodus, and how much the increase in Russia's anti-Westernism will affect the attitudes of the other BRICS countries towards participation and cooperation within the group.

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