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# Emerging Powers and Status: The Case of the First Brics Summit

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## Resumo

Why did the leaders of four very different countries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—decide to hold a summit in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, thus transforming "the BRICs" from a financial category into a political grouping? I argue that the main driver for the first summit to take place and succeed was to strengthen each member country's international status. The 2009 BRICs summit was successful in that it led to the birth of a political platform during highly unusual international economic and political circumstances. In a global economy in the midst of a recession and widespread uncertainty, the BRICs' relative economic stability and capacity to respond to the crisis was decisive and lent credibility to their call for reform of the international system. The United States' temporarily reduced legitimacy also provided a window of opportunity for emerging powers to act as aspiring guarantors of stability in tomorrow's world. While measurable gains from cooperation and stronger rhetoric that delegitimized the global order did occur in the following years, they were not the primary drivers for the first summit to take place and succeed.

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## Texto

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BRICS ACRONYM FROM AN INVESTMENT term into a household name in international politics is one of the most important developments in international politics in the past decade. While the term is now commonly used in general public debate and in the international media, the number of scholarly analyses of the history of the BRICS term is limited largely to the rise of the BRICS. In particular, the BRICS' move toward institutionalization, which began in earnest in 2009

with the first leaders' summit in Yekaterinburg, has received insufficient attention from the academic community. This is surprising because the BRICs countries' decision to organize yearly summits and thus to assume ownership of the term occurred in the same year as another important innovation in global governance, the Group of Twenty (G-20).

This article seeks to chronicle and contextualize the first BRICs summit in 2009. I seek to explain why its four leaders decided to hold the summit and why they succeeded in laying the groundwork for the BRICS grouping.

Multiple definitions of "success" are possible in the context of international summitry. I argue that the BRICs summit in 2009 was a success for two reasons. First, on the most basic level, success can be defined as the capacity to institutionalize an outfit that is still in existence today. Second, the BRICs summit helped member states raise their international status, which proved to be useful for achieving joint or individual national goals later on. For example, the BRICs grouping indirectly helped its members speak with one voice on some issues and increase their bargaining power. The G-20 leaders' endorsement at the London 2009 summit of almost all of the substantive recommendations put forward by the BRICs countries' finance ministers shows that the BRICs nations were able to use their temporarily increased bargaining power to turn into "agenda setters" at the time. This act culminated in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) quota reforms agreed upon in 2010 (Gros et al. 2012). Failure, as a consequence, would be the incapacity either to institutionalize the BRICs concept through yearly summits and multiple ministry-level meetings or to raise member states' profiles and bargaining power in specific circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the creation of the BRICs, one important question concerns motivation: Does the emergence of the BRICs nations signify the discontent of rising powers with the current structure of the international system? Some observers would expect them to align in order to balance the hegemon. Indeed, one potential gain may derive from the capacity to obtain more negotiating power by speaking with a common voice on issues of interest. For example, Pang Zhongying argued in 2009 that the BRICs Summit had a "substantial and substantive" significance as "a new-born nonWestern cooperation framework between the four biggest emerging economies of the world," creating a balance against the dominance of developed countries (Xing and Xin 2009).

Others have pointed out that the first BRICs summit was primarily meant to strengthen intra-BRICs cooperation and share best practices regarding domestic issues such as poverty, food security, education, and health care. In addition to the summit declaration, the BRICs nations did make a separate announcement about food security (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders on Global Food Security 2009). Despite their differences, BRICs countries do face similar challenges regarding their societies' transition toward middle-income status. Furthermore, one could assume that cooperation in fields such as science and technology may have contributed to the decision to bring the four leaders together in June 2009, since an explicit reference was made to scientific cooperation in the 2009 summit declaration (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009).

Finally, the BRIC term may serve each country's need to increase its international status as a dynamic and emerging power with a growing role in global affairs. "The BRICs" provides additional legitimacy and authority, helping these countries to be recognized by the established powers as having those attributes. Being a BRICs member implies a considerable degree of social recognition—partly provided by the other members but also by prestigious economic forecasters and opinion makers—that might enhance each country's bargaining power. Membership may also help reduce the still considerable trust deficit between members of the grouping (Xing and Xin 2009).

### The First BRICs Summit

Political dialogue within the BRICs format began in New York in September 2006, when their foreign ministers met during the Sixty-First UN General Assembly. Since then, the foreign ministers have convened regularly, including a meeting in Yekaterinburg on May 16, 2008. At the initiative of Russia, the four BRICs leaders had a short meeting on July 9, 2008, during the G-8 summit in Japan and agreed to hold a full-scale summit the following year (Medvedev 2009a). Ties between the BRICs foreign ministers were strengthened by the meetings between the BRICs finance ministers in São Paulo, Brazil, on November 7, 2008, and in London on March 13, 2009 (Medvedev 2009a). BRICs was, by then, routinely described in the media as an "informal group" (Houlton 2009) or a "loose group" (Medvedev 2009a). At the time, the BRICs countries held a 15 percent share of the world economy and a 42 percent share of global currency reserves (Houlton 2009).

### An Experiment

On June 16, 2009, Russia hosted the first BRICs leaders' summit, which was attended by Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Russia's president Dmitry Medvedev, India's prime minister Manmohan Singh, and China's president Hu Jintao (Reis 2012). Medvedev hailed the Urals host city of Yekaterinburg as "the epicenter of world politics." The need for major developing world nations to meet in new formats was "obvious," he said (Medvedev 2009b). Only a day earlier in the same city, Russia had hosted the Ninth Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with many observer countries, including a brief visit by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had just been declared the winner of a controversial presidential election in Iran. Given that the SCO was far better established by 2009 than the BRICs grouping, holding the BRICs summit can be seen as an experiment rather than a concerted effort, particularly since aside from the Brazilian delegation, the Russians, the Chinese, and the Indians (the latter with observer status) were already in town for the SCO summit.

While Russia had early on indicated that it envisioned a broader institutional collaboration, the Russian government did not assume the risk of organizing a stand-alone summit. The international media paid more attention to the SCO summit, which included a meeting between India's Singh and Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari (China Daily 2009). Russia also used the meeting to hold important bilateral talks with

the Indian delegation (Medvedev 2009d). In his opening address at the BRICs summit, Medvedev was therefore rather modest: "Ultimately, our success in implementing new economic programs and reforming international financial relations will depend on the extent to which we understand each other's positions and perhaps develop joint proposals" (Medvedev 2009b).

In fact, the summit declaration and the rhetoric employed such as "emerging and developing economies must have greater voice and representation in international financial institutions" (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009)-served several purposes. The first was to affirm newfound political importance and the call for more space at international forums; global problems, the Russian president declared, "cannot be effectively solved without the involvement of the BRICs countries" (Medvedev 2009a). The commitment to strengthening the G-20 was therefore the first item in the summit's final declaration. Furthermore, institutionalization in the form of an exclusive BRICs club sought to make the transition of power from Europe and the United States toward emerging powers seem inevitable. With an eye on the economic woes of the European Union and the United States at that time, the BRICs summit sought to project more power than the global distribution of economic power would suggest. As Medvedev pointed out, there was a "need to put in place a fairer decisionmaking process regarding the economic, foreign policy, and security issues on the international agenda" and that "the BRICs summit aims to create the conditions for this new order" (Medvedev 2009c). Particular emphasis was laid on ending the informal agreement that the United States and Europe could appoint the World Bank president and IMF director, respectively. Rather, those leadership positions should be appointed through "an open, transparent, and merit-based selection process" (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009).

This affirmation became somewhat of a rallying cry for the BRICs nations in the following years, thus creating one clear and simple narrative on which all emerging powers could agree. As President Lula argued on the day of the summit, "We stand out because in recent years our four economies have shown robust growth. Trade between us has risen 500 percent since 2003. This helps explain why we now generate 65 percent of world growth, which makes us the main hope for a swift recovery from global recession" (Lula da Silva 2009).

### Seeking a New Economic Order

BRICs countries are playing an increasingly prominent role in international affairs, and they are showing a readiness to assume responsibilities in proportion to their standing in the modern world (Xing and Xin 2009). Projecting confidence and stability was particularly important at a time of global economic chaos, when the BRICs countries perceived a leadership vacuum. BRICs nations enjoyed an average annual economic growth of 10.7 percent from 2006 to 2008, greatly exceeding growth figures in the developed world (Xing and Xin 2009). As a consequence, one of the main themes of the summit was how to create a new world order less dependent on the United States.

Russia's finance minister, Aleksey Kudrin, argued that "around 400 billion dollars have

been accumulating for IMF including contributions from Russia, Brazil and China. . . . These resources are in demand especially in Central and Western Europe where the impact of the crisis is very serious" (Russia Times 2009). The main point of the meeting was to show that "the BRIC should create conditions for a more just world order" (Kramer 2009). The BRICS countries thus depicted themselves as responsible stakeholders whose more adequate inclusion into global decisionmaking structures would have positive effects for global economic stability and more generally for global governance. Brazil, for example, was the world's tenth-largest economy in 2009, but had just 1.38 percent of the IMF board's votes, compared to 2.09 percent for Belgium, an economy one-third the size (Houlton 2009).

Aside from seeking to reform international institutions, reducing global dependence on the dollar was one of the key themes of the summit's conversations. Prior to the summit, Medvedev proposed that countries use a mix of regional reserve currencies to reduce reliance on the dollar (Xu 2009). Russia said it would reduce the share of US Treasury bills in its \$400 billion of reserves (China Daily 2009). This echoed China's and Brazil's decision to invest \$40 billion and \$10 billion, respectively, in IMF bonds, a move to diversify their dollar-heavy currency reserves.<sup>2</sup> While the BRICs leaders may discuss how to reduce dollar assets in their existing reserves, the Russian government also sought to discuss ways to limit the use of the dollar in bilateral intra-BRICs trades. China, which has the strongest trade ties with the other BRICs countries, had already signed a deal with Brazil in May 2009 that allowed some bilateral trade transactions to be conducted in Brazilian reals and Chinese yuan.

### An Odd Grouping?

The international media treated the first BRICs summit with a combination of rejection and neglect. Indeed, from the very beginning, many observers pointed out that despite the acronym's attractiveness and its capacity to offer an easy account of a new distribution of global power, the category was inadequate for a more rigorous analysis, given that the differences between the BRICs nations far outweighed their commonalities (Hurrell 2006). For example, in economic terms, Russia and Brazil are large commodity exporters, whereas China is a big commodity importer; China is a proponent of the Doha trade round, while India is skeptical. This point matters, as the parties generate growth in different and often opposing ways. While Brazil and Russia benefit from high energy prices, India, as a major energy consumer, suffers from them (Sharma 2012). From a political perspective, Brazil's and India's vibrant democracies contrast with China's and Russia's authoritarian governments (Stephens 2011). Brazil is nonnuclear, while the other three possess nuclear weapons, and India is a nonsignatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). More importantly still, an unresolved border conflict between China and India as well as overlapping spheres of interest in the Indian Ocean are often cited as proof that the BRICs nations represent an impossible alliance.

On a more general level, however, the BRICs countries are not a coherent group because their positions in the global political order differ greatly. While Brazil and India are pushing for a more fundamental redistribution of institutional power in today's

global governance structures, Russia and China-both permanent members of the UN Security Council-are essentially status quo powers, reluctant to change a system that has served them well. Finally, bilateral ties between some of the BRICs countries, such as between Russia and Brazil, are insignificant. In sum, for many observers the BRICs group was too disparate to constitute a meaningful category, which may explain why the international media routinely called the BRICs nations "a disparate quartet" (The Economist 2009), a "motley crew" (Saran and Sharan 2012)," or an "odd grouping" (El-Shenawi 2011).

Yet despite the criticism, the 2009 BRICs summit was a success. Contrary to general expectations, a second BRICs summit followed in April 2010 in Brasília, which marked the beginning of more specific intra-BRICs cooperation in an attempt to strengthen ties at different levels of government and civil society, including business and union representatives and think tanks. The third BRICs leaders' summit in Sanya (China) in March 2011 saw the participation of a new member, South Africa, which symbolized the BRICS nations taking full ownership of the term. (South Africa officially joined in December, changing the acronym BRICs to BRICS.) During the fourth BRICS summit in New Delhi in 2012, leaders declared they would study the viability of a BRICS Development Bank, which would in fact be the first step toward institutionalizing the BRICS group. The number of issues debated at the summit broadened yet again, ranging from geopolitics and the civil war in Syria to the economic crisis to domestic challenges such as education and health care.

In addition to the yearly summits, numerous working groups and regular ministry-level meetings in areas such as defense, health, education, finance, trade, agriculture, and science and technology have been established over the past two years, creating an unprecedented degree of interaction. More than fifty official meetings have been held between the BRICS countries, not to mention regular meetings of central bank heads, urbanization experts, think-tank representatives, and businesspeople. All these activities inevitably increase mutual exposure among the BRICS countries, allowing them to engage on several levels and identify further areas of cooperation. In addition, stronger civil society links may create growing public support for enhancing intraBRICS ties. "BRICS and Africa: Partnerships for Integration and Industrialization" was the theme of the fifth BRICS summit, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2013. One key issue stood out at the summit: the promotion of African infrastructure development through the establishment of a BRICS-led development bank.

The sixth BRICS summit takes place in 2014 in Fortaleza, Brazil, even though growth figures among the five countries are by now far lower than in 2009. This trajectory shows that the first BRICs leaders' summit in Yekaterinburg was the successful opening chapter of a platform that shaped South-South cooperation in the early twenty-first century.

## Status and Recognition

### A Powerful New Narrative

This brief description of the debates at the first BRICs summit in Yekaterinburg shows that the main motivation for its organization-and its success in institutionalizing the BRICs platform was not to create an antihegemonic alliance. There are few indicators that the pro-reform rhetoric was a sign of confrontation designed to undermine existing global structures. While many analysts at the time predicted that the first summit declaration would call for meaningful steps to reduce the importance of the US dollar in the global economy, the declaration makes no reference to the topic.

In fact, the BRICs' declaration can even be read as an attempt to strengthen current structures and as a reaffirmation of the BRICs' commitment to generally accepted principles. In Article Six of the Summit Declaration, the BRICs states argued that "developed countries should fulfill their commitment of 0.7% of Gross National Income for Official Development Assistance and make further efforts in increasing assistance, debt relief, market access, and technology transfer for developing countries" (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009). Moreover, the declaration's call for greater transparency in the selection process of the leadership of the Bretton Woods institutions was far from revisionist. It merely represented a way to broaden emerging powers' influence in existing institutions. Based on the evidence, therefore, antihegemonic behavior is unlikely to explain the organization and success of the first BRICs summit. Such ideas only emerged in a more articulate fashion during subsequent summits.

Neither was intra-BRICs cooperation the main driver of the summit's success. Article Ten of the declaration states that "we reaffirm to enhance cooperation among our countries in socially vital areas and to strengthen the efforts for the provision of international humanitarian assistance and for the reduction of natural disaster risks" (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009). In Article Eleven, the parties agreed "to advance cooperation among our countries in science and education with the aim, inter alia, to engage in fundamental research and development of advanced technologies" (Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries' Leaders 2009). Yet while there may have been a legitimate hope to develop meaningful intra-BRICs cooperation in the future, it cannot be said to have been the main driver of the summit's success in institutionalizing the grouping. While subsequent summits provided more sophisticated frameworks of cooperation and "action plans," the first summit's declaration made no specific recommendations but merely elaborated general areas of interest. Also, little evidence suggests that specific cooperation agreements have been made in direct consequence of the first BRICs summit, other than the organization of the second BRICs summit in Brasília in 2010.

Still, the first BRICs summit did boost the international status of each participant. Only the unique economic constellation at the time-a faltering center and a thriving periphery-allowed the BRICs countries to position themselves as the new pillars of stability of the world economy. Brazil, Russia, India, and China turned into de facto representatives of the emerging world and indispensable actors in the construction of tomorrow's global order.<sup>3</sup> The BRICs grouping thus did not succeed because of specific projects that its members sought to develop jointly but rather because it powerfully symbolized a narrative that seemed distant in the 1990s but appeared to make sense

in the 2000s: a momentous shift of power from the United States and Europe toward emerging-market countries such as China, India, and Brazil, making the world less Western and more ideologically diverse (Schweller 2011). Economic liberalization in these emerging economies began to pay off, resulting in growth rates consistently higher than in the developed world. The increased prominence of global challenges—from climate change, failed states, and poverty reduction to nuclear proliferation—contributed to a growing consensus that emerging countries such as Brazil, India, and China were indispensable in the effort to develop meaningful solutions (Hurrell 2006). Global summits could no longer claim legitimacy and inclusiveness without inviting Brazil, Russia, India, and China. The BRICs acronym both captured and further enhanced these sentiments, proving to be a useful shorthand for a complex scenario marked by the redistribution of global power (Stephens 2011), the emergence of nonestablished actors, and the advent of a "post-American world" (Zakaria 2008), or a "postWestern world" (Serfaty 2011). The BRICs summit institutionalized this powerful narrative.

### A New Economic Center, Thanks to Goldman Sachs

Furthermore, Goldman Sachs's judgment about the grouping's future provided the members with the necessary authority to make their role as emerging powers credible. In "Building Better Global Economic BRICs," O'Neill predicted that "over the next 10 years, the weight of the BRICs and especially China in world GDP will grow, raising important issues about the global economic impact of fiscal and monetary policy in the BRICs" (O'Neill 2001, 1). In 2003 Goldman Sachs published another paper, titled "Dreaming with the BRICS: The Path to 2050." This paper made more specific and far-reaching recommendations, predicting that by 2050, the BRICs economies would be larger in US dollar terms than the G-6, which consists of the United States, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy (Ahmed, Kelston, and Wilson 2010). The paper's impact among investors and bankers was considerably larger than that of the first one. More importantly, the paper's influence went beyond the financial world, helping the "BRICs" term turn, in the following years, into a buzzword in international politics (Cheng et al. 2007; Tett 2010).

In 2005 Goldman Sachs argued that the BRICs would rise even faster than predicted in 2003 (O'Neill et al. 2005). By the time the BRICs leaders met for the first time for an official summit in 2009, the general media routinely referred to "the BRICs" without an explanatory addendum (The Economist 2009). In 2010 Goldman Sachs called the first ten years of the twenty-first century the "BRICs Decade" (Ahmed, Kelston, and Wilson 2010). The fact that Goldman Sachs, rather than any other bank or financial forecaster, created the BRICs term may have been decisive. During the last decade, Goldman Sachs has been regularly cited as one of the most admired and influential companies in the world, with intimate ties to global political elites (Foley 2008). In David Rothkopf's *Superclass*, Goldman Sachs plays a pivotal role as one of the nerve centers of the global elite, with vast influence over political and economic debate (Rothkopf 2008). Thus, without the investment bank's promotion of the term, the four countries in question would have had a smaller incentive to organize a summit, since the implications for their international status would have been far smaller. Rather than



creating a concept from scratch, Goldman Sachs's creation and promotion of the BRICs idea provided tremendous assistance in these emerging powers' attempts to build a political platform. Goldman Sachs's promotion of the BRICs term was thus crucial for the group's creation.

### US Decline Provides an Opportunity

Finally, the temporarily reduced legitimacy of the United States and a powerful declinist narrative provided a window of opportunity for emerging powers to pose as aspiring guarantors of stability that deserved more responsibility in international affairs. In the years leading up to the first BRICs summit, US power seemed to reach its limits in costly and potentially ill-conceived military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and a war on terror (Kowitz 2009).<sup>4</sup> At a remarkable speed, unipolarity turned into a mere transition phase on the way toward a multipolar age. As Xiayou Pu and Randall Schweller argued, "Unipolarity, which seemed strangely durable only a few years ago, appears today as a 'passing moment.'" They further contended that the United States was "no longer a hyperpower towering over potential contenders. The rest of the world is catching up" (Pu and Schweller 2011, 41). While the US National Intelligence Council's 2004 Global Trends report had still predicted that the United States would remain the "single most powerful actor economically, technologically, and militarily" (US National Intelligence Council 2004, 8), the 2008 issue predicted "a world in which the US plays a prominent role in global events, but . . . as one among many global actors" (US National Intelligence Council 2008, 2). A poll taken in 2010 by Fox News found that 62 percent of Americans thought their nation was in decline, more than double the 26 percent who believed it was on the rise (Rachman 2012).

Gideon Rachman argued that "new powers are on the rise. . . . They each have their own foreign-policy preferences, which collectively constrain America's ability to shape the world. Think of how India and Brazil sided with China at the global climatechange talks. . . . That is just a taste of things to come" (Rachman 2011b). Looking at the United States, he wrote that "if America were able openly to acknowledge that its global power is in decline, it would be much easier to have a rational debate about what to do about it" (Rachman 2011a). Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser under President Jimmy Carter, captured a general sense of declinist anxiety, arguing,

A . . . consequence of American decline could be a corrosion of the generally cooperative management of the global commons-shared interests such as sea lanes, space, cyberspace, and the environment, whose protection is imperative to the long-term growth of the global economy and the continuation of basic geopolitical stability. In almost every case, the potential absence of a constructive and influential U.S. role would fatally undermine the essential communality of the global commons because the superiority and ubiquity of American power creates order where there would normally be conflict. (Brzezinski 2012, 2)

The timing of the first BRICs summit, at the high point of a general sense of crisis in the United States and with it of global order in general, was thus an important part of

its success at institutionalizing an emerging power platform. It was done at a low point of US legitimacy in global affairs. Aside from the BRICs summit, more assertive emerging-power behavior, such as Brazilian president Lula's and Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdogan's initiative to seek an agreement on Iran's nuclear program, can similarly be explained in this geopolitical context (Rachman 2011b).

The year 2009 thus became a year of institutional innovation in global governance. Only a few months after the first BRICs summit in Russia, the G-20 established itself as the principal platform to discuss the global economy, fulfilling one of the key demands of BRICs representatives. Their first meeting consequently must be seen in the context of the beginning of the Western economic crisis. In effect, the crisis provided an ideal opportunity for the BRICs nations to develop common positions that highlighted the contrast between a prospering periphery and a struggling core. In 2009 alone, BRICs finance ministers met three times. Their capacity to respond-principally by providing the IMF with more funds-allowed the group to adopt an assertive stance. The historic IMF quota reforms of 2010 were a direct result of the BRICs' call for change (Gros et al. 2012).

### Gains for Everyone

Seen from this perspective, the institutionalization of the BRICs grouping was, above all, a diplomatic coup for Russia, which was able to become part of a group of economically dynamic countries whose strongest moment was thought to lie not in the past but in the future. Russia was the country that benefited most from the summit; as a declining power, it was able to move toward the status of an emerging power that can be expected to play a greater role in future global affairs. While Brazil, India, and China have all the classic characteristics of emerging markets-rising life expectancy, rising GDP per capita, improving health and education standards, and even a degree of soft power-Russian social indicators have worsened over the past decade (Eberstadt 2011). Economically, Russia has failed to diversify away from natural resources, leaving the country vulnerable to external shocks (Macfarlane 2006).

Reflecting on Russia over the past two decades, Nicholas Eberstadt argues,

Perhaps of all the painful developments in Russian society since the Soviet collapse, the most surprising-and dismaying-is the country's demographic decline. Over the past two decades, Russia has been caught in the grip of a devastating and highly anomalous peacetime population crisis. The country's population has been shrinking, its mortality levels are nothing short of catastrophic, and its human resources appear to be dangerously eroding. (Eberstadt 2011, 95)

Few observers would associate such a description with a typical emerging power. Macfarlane sums up Russia's situation by writing,

The notion of emergence suggests a state that is growing dynamically and undergoing a transformation; a state whose rising power causes it to question its established

place in the system and to assert itself more ambitiously in international politics. This image is far from Russian reality. Russia is more properly seen as a state that has recently experienced substantial damage and is attempting to stop the bleeding. (Macfarlane 2006, 43)

The possibility to dramatically improve its international status explains Russia's eagerness to institutionalize the BRICs summit. As mentioned previously, Russia early on took a leading role in the planning process that led to the first summit. In conversations with diplomats, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, is often described as the intellectual architect of the politicization of the BRICs platform (though Brazil's foreign minister, Celso Amorim, is also cited at times) (Diplomats at UN Missions 2013). Similarly, it may not be a coincidence that the first BRICs leaders' summit took place in Russia instead of another BRICs country. Russia thus seized a unique opportunity to position itself together with three of the most dynamic large economies at the time, thereby presumably enhancing its international prestige.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from Russia, Brazil also gained a good deal. Its BRICs identity was reaffirmed, which was important inasmuch as the general narrative of the global shift of power had usually been expressed in the context of "Asia's rise" (Spektor 2013). The BRICs grouping allowed Brazil henceforth to be grouped together with China, Russia, and India—all nuclear powers that were seen as geopolitical heavyweights in comparison. As Matias Spektor writes, describing the years prior to the first BRICs summit, the US went to war in the Middle East, Europe faltered, Asia rose, and the institutions that governed the world were evidently no longer up to the task. Unsettling as they were, these transformations opened up a new world of opportunities. Brazil responded accordingly (Spektor 2013). But even China's and India's international status benefited from their participation in the first BRICs summit, even though the impact of the summit on their global standing was arguably smaller than for Russia or Brazil. China seemed to have agreed to the first BRICs meeting in order to position itself as part of a group of "normal" emerging powers rather than be identified as the sole challenger to the United States and the global liberal order. As a consequence, China has been described, by diplomats who participated in the first summit and several presummit meetings, as a moderating force (Diplomats of BRICS Countries 2012). Also for this reason, despite its dominant size within the BRICs grouping, China has never attempted to exert excessive influence over it. Generally speaking, it has allowed other BRICs members to adopt leadership roles. For example, in 2009 China's Hu Jintao allowed Medvedev to play the most visible role.

India, for its part, gained considerably from being part of the BRICs grouping as it put the country into the same category as China, to some extent compensating for the fact that India lags far behind China economically. Suggesting that status matters greatly to India, Amrita Narlikar, a keen observer of Indian negotiating behavior, argues that "it is easier for [an Indian] minister to come back home empty-handed as a wounded hero, rather than to come back with something after having had to make a compromise" (Narlikar 2006, 72). Indian negotiators are often seen as obstructionist, inflexible, and excessively tied to principles, fearing that conceding on any issue could be interpreted as weakness and a loss of respect or status. In this context, BRICs

membership was unanimously welcomed by the Indian government (Indian Diplomats 2013).

In sum, the BRICs summit was a win-win situation and status enhancer for all four countries. It exploited a unique opportunity created by a rare global scenario that allowed them to position themselves as rising powers that will inevitably play a larger role in the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the main driver for the first BRICs summit to take place and succeed was the common desire of the four parties to strengthen their international status. The 2009 BRICs summit was successful in that it led to the birth of a political platform during highly unusual economic and political global circumstances. In a global economy in the midst of a recession and widespread uncertainty, and with the United States' temporarily reduced legitimacy, the BRICs nations' relative economic stability and capacity to respond to the crisis proved decisive in lending credibility to their call for reform of the international system.

Also lending credibility was Goldman Sachs's judgment about the grouping's future role as emerging powers. Over the past decade, the investment bank has continuously ranked among the world's most influential institutions, and it is doubtful whether any other institution would have been able to coin and market a term as successfully as it did.

The BRICs summit was a success not so much because of cooperation among the four countries as because of the status conferred on them as large and dynamic twenty-first-century emerging powers. This explains why Russia, in many respects a declining power, was so keen to develop the BRICs concept further. Despite Russia's problems, the BRICs grouping helped Russia modify and improve its international status. While measurable gains from cooperation and stronger rhetoric about delegitimizing the global order did occur in the following years, they were not the primary drivers for the first summit to take place and succeed.

Almost certainly, the BRICs grouping would not have been able to gain comparable status during the 1990s, when the United States—and with it the global liberal order—enjoyed widespread international support. The BRICs summit contributed significantly to turning the BRICs members into representatives of dynamic economies and powers that must be reckoned with—even though the group's coherence is questionable, and other countries may just as well have been part of it.

These findings raise several questions. If the successful launch of the BRICs grouping depended on a profound crisis of legitimacy in the United States as the guarantor of the global liberal order, can the BRICs group continue to thrive if the United States overcomes the current economic crisis and regains its lost legitimacy? How long will the grouping provide the status gains I described here? This question is of particular importance in a scenario in which the BRICs nations will become an increasingly

established power, one in which other countries, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Nigeria, will seek to position themselves as the new class of emerging powers.

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