

Russia's Participation in BRICS: Influence from Domestic Political and Social Evolution

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Abstract: Since the 21st century, Russia has shifted to a new multilateralist foreign policy and actively participated in BRICS cooperation in order to hedge against the strategic pressure of the United States and NATO and to provide support for its national interests and international strategy. Through documentary analysis and historical research methods, this paper attempts to discuss the impact of Russia's political and social evolution on its diplomacy. Due to Russia's continued domestic economic woes, low political participation and cultural pluralism trends, the public's attitude toward Russia's participation in BRICS has shifted from eagerness to rationality, leading the government to become more pragmatic in its multilateral foreign policy, pursuing the realization of its national interests while building a new great power image through participation in global governance and public diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, Russia's foreign policy has undergone a series of transformations. As the heir to a once vast empire, Russia was more of a threat than a partner to the West, and efforts to "become part of the West" soon failed. After leaving the G8, Russia's foreign policy focus shifted from the West to the East, trying to explore cooperation with emerging countries such as China, while Putin's series of political maneuvers again and again caused anxiety in the West, and Russia's strategic hostility became a "self-fulfilling prophecy", leading to military pressure and economic sanctions by the United States and NATO --This, in a sense, strengthens Russia's motivation to cooperate with the BRICS countries [1]. The attitudes of Russia's domestic political elite and public have, to a certain extent, provided the motivation for Russia to cooperate with emerging countries, and the changes in its domestic political and social environment have also had a significant impact on its participation in BRICS cooperation.

2. New changes in Russia's social ecology since the new century

2.1 Economic Fluctuations and Social Divisions

The economic fluctuations in Russia since the new century have led to social polarization and increasingly complicated livelihood issues in Russia. After the dramatic changes during the Gorbachev era and the comprehensive westernization reforms under Yeltsin, the Russian economy was once chaotic and regressive. Russia's economic problems can be divided into internal and external aspects. On the one hand, internal economic reforms have been sluggish. The political and economic reforms under Putin's administration since the beginning of the new millennium have been effective but have also faced many problems. Efforts to improve economic governance and transparency and to move toward a functioning rule of law have ended in failure, and the pace of economic reform continues to lag behind the needs of economic growth. In particular, Russia's heavy reliance on the energy industry has led to an over-sensitivity to fluctuations in international oil and gas prices, structural vulnerabilities and imbalances in the economy that hinder long-term stability and healthy development, inefficiencies in the old economic model, and the need to finance the construction of a new version of Crimea, which is a drag on the overall economy [2]. The Russian economic system is unsound and unbalanced, the environment for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises is not friendly, and the total federal foreign debt is high. On the other hand, the external economic environment is harsh. Frequent economic sanctions against Russia by the United States and its allies in recent years, the negative rating of Russia's credit rating during 2014-2016 indirectly affected international investment confidence (the business confidence index rose above 0% only briefly in 2007-2008 and 2012), limiting the entry of external capital into Russia and triggering capital outflows, and the high volatility of the ruble made the EFT lack stable financial support. Russia's deteriorating economic environment and unbalanced economic structure have led to poor livelihoods, which have improved but are lower than those of other emerging countries. From a demographic and labor force perspective, the low birth rate in Russia in recent years (stagnant growth of new births per year from 2015 to date), accompanied by the loss of young talent and aging, has led to a shortage of skilled workers in Russia. Russia has experienced a serious brain drain of highly knowledgeable professionals, with a large number of skilled people going to Europe and the U.S. to earn a living, and a lack of domestic talent attraction, with the labor force participation rate falling to around 62% from around 70% in 2016[3]. At the same time, Russia's domestic price, household income, pensions, social security payments and other indicators are slowly improving, the demand for livelihood improvement has not been met for a long time, the average household income has slowly increased from 23,000 rubles in 2015 to 23,700 rubles in 2019, the public consumer confidence index continues to be in a negative state (once fell to -50% in 2009 and 2015), Russian households debt-to-GDP ratio rose from below 5% in 2000 to 18.8% in the third quarter of 2019[4].

2.2 Popular political participation

The resistance to political reforms in Russia and the lack of results have led to a low level of popular political participation within Russia. Social reforms in Russia under Putin obviously lagged behind economic reforms, broke but not established, and social transformation was not complete; institutional reforms, judicial reforms and educational reforms, although they have achieved certain results, still face a series of problems. The inefficiency of public administration, high corruption rate and political party election procedures have become the main targets of civil opposition forces [5]. Russia's corruption index rose from 21 in 2010 to 28 in 2019, and the bureaucratic ills inherited from the Yeltsin era have not been effectively curbed with Putin's reforms. Distrust in government, frustration with public power, and lack of ability and willingness to participate in politics have led to a backlog of popular demands, but the extent and effectiveness of popular political participation still needs to be improved. There is a serious disconnect between Russians' public and private lives.

Nearly 40% of the respondents expressed interest in political development but rarely participated in the practice of political life, and only 3% of Russians actively participate in political parties and political activities.

2.3 Political and Cultural Diversity

After the end of the Cold War, Russian society and culture have become increasingly diverse, making the psychology and social thinking of Russian society complex and uncertain. Discontinuities in political and economic development and extreme social ecology have led to social dysfunction and political extremism in Russia, which is not conducive to the healthy development of new cultural orientations [6]. However, with the spread of technology and the deepening of the Internet era, the social culture and psychology of the Russian population are changing subconsciously. With Internet speed in Russia steadily increasing from 2,000 kbps to 11,846.17 kbps in 2016 and the number of Russian Internet users exceeding 95 million, the Internet age has profoundly changed the way people participate in politics and social trends. The socio-psychological culture and trends of thought of different age groups, classes, regions and nationalities show differentiated and complex features [7]. Socio-cultural differences in Russia are reflected in the following aspects: first, intergenerational conceptual differences. The generation that retains the memory of Soviet collectivism and the generation that was born in the post-demolition period when liberalism and individualism prevailed in full Westernization have very different psycho-social culture. The older generation's dissatisfaction with the reality of life triggered nostalgia for the memory of Soviet collectivism, while the younger generation's unfulfilled expectations and aspirations for domestic politics and society inspired a yearning for and pursuit of European and American culture. Second, class culture differences. The upper class of the Russian elite and the owners of large enterprises are significantly more powerful in terms of resources and social status than the general public, and the gap between the rich and the poor has led to serious social division and confrontation. The marginalized groups, represented by the "new poor class," are not provided with corresponding social resources despite their knowledge and skills, and the incomplete development of the middle class makes the society less stable. Thirdly, there are regional differences between urban and rural areas. The level of economic and social development in Russia is significantly higher than in other regions, and the gap between the central and eastern Siberian regions and the cultural circle of the capital is significant, and the difference between urban and rural culture does not diminish with economic improvement. Fourth, inter-ethnic differences. The Russian nation and other ethnic minorities, as the main group, occupy the majority of social resources, while the marginalization and centrifugal tendencies of nationalism and extremism of ethnic minorities cannot be ignored, and the trend of integration and differentiation of minority cultures from the main group culture needs further long-term observation [8].

2.4 Popular attitudes toward BRICS cooperation

Domestic society to a certain extent affects Russia's attitude toward participation in global governance and multilateral diplomacy. Russian society's expectation of the government's restoration of great power status and the concern of strategic overdraft have always gone hand in hand. The grassroots are more concerned with livelihood issues of immediate interest and have a considerable degree of indifference to diplomatic action. The elite class is concerned about Russia's relations with the EU, the US, China and other major powers, especially the games involving the economic and energy spheres. It is noteworthy that during the new crown epidemic, Russia took the initiative to increase cooperation among the BRICS countries in the economic and social spheres to

jointly address the epidemic in order to mitigate its impact. The Russian public's attitude toward the government's multilateral diplomacy in global governance suffers from over-expectation and under-involvement. Despite the distraction of narrow nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, the Russian public is generally more friendly toward China than most countries in Europe and the United States, with nearly 60 percent of Russians surveyed approving of China's performance on the international stage, compared to about 45 percent of the British, American, French and German public who have a negative opinion of China's diplomacy. Russian media coverage of China is also relatively more objective than Western media.

3. Impact of Russian social changes on BRICS cooperation

3.1 Russia's Participation in BRICS: From Expectation to Disappointment

The public's psychological over-expectation and disappointment in BRICS cooperation have shaped the government's enthusiasm to participate in multilateral diplomacy. Under the influence of the global populist wave, there is also a new development in Russia's indigenous populism, which, in addition to nationalism and patriotic exclusivity, puts more emphasis on criticism of the current government and institutions. Some opponents argue that such unequal multilateral cooperation puts Russia's national interests at a disadvantage, that it may allow China to weaken Russia's influence in BRICS cooperation by virtue of its economic power, and even that China's economic radiance in Siberia threatens Russia's Far Eastern homeland security. By using BRICS cooperation as a breakthrough, Russian society expects to open up cooperation with emerging countries in order to escape from the economic recession caused by the U.S. blockade [9]. However, with the advancement of BRICS cooperation, the economic fluctuations within BRICS countries and the rigidity of the cooperation mechanism, supporters within Russia who initially had high hopes for BRICS cooperation questioned its effectiveness and became disappointed, criticizing BRICS cooperation for its form over content and not supporting Russia's consumption of excessive diplomatic resources in such multilateral diplomacy.

3.2 Prioritizing interests: BRICS cooperation tends to be pragmatic

Domestic societal demands for economic development have made BRICS cooperation more pragmatic. Russia's pragmatic approach to economic development and economic system reform is reflected in the "Concept of the Russian Federation's Membership in the BRICS Mechanism" signed by Russia in 2013, rather than in its ambition to lead BRICS cooperation to restore "great power status. Russia's desired great power status lacks the support of a strong economic and financial base and has a limited ability to project influence at the global level [10]. But countries are in serious economic and political distress today, and in addition to higher federal interest rates that have led to increased debt burdens in emerging economies, falling global commodity prices have affected these emerging markets, which rely heavily on export-driven growth. Russian society realized the importance of strengthening its economic sovereignty at the time of the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions, striving for closer economic and financial ties with emerging countries and working with OPEC and oil-producing countries to stabilize oil prices in order to offset the negative impact of Western financial and economic sanctions and reduce dependence on European energy exports. Increased spending on social sectors or greater government support through policy changes through domestic reforms and international cooperation may promote social development and protect the declining BRICS countries.

3.3 Russian social opinion: towards rationality

The social opinion environment that has contributed to Russia's participation in BRICS cooperation has been favorable. As one of Putin's signature diplomatic achievements, BRICS cooperation has provided Russia with much-needed political support and legitimacy in a period of alienation and isolation from the West, and domestic society has high expectations for it. Russian leader Vladimir Putin noted at the BRICS Brazil summit in November 2019: "In our view, the main goal of cooperation among BRICS countries is to bring real benefits to people, to help improve living standards and quality of life." Russia takes over the BRICS presidency in January 2020, and domestic public opinion is correspondingly more interested in BRICS cooperation. The rapid coordination of BRICS mechanisms during the global spread of the new crown epidemic made BRICS one of the first countries to respond to the February outbreak. Over the past decade, BRICS cooperation has generated a special culture of cooperation, the "BRICS spirit" of mutual respect and non-coercive cooperation, and has helped resolve more than one bilateral disagreement. The Russian presidency will enrich the five-party interaction through additional initiatives that will benefit Russian domestic public opinion in favor of the government's participation in BRICS and its multilateral diplomatic initiative.

4. Prospects for Russia's participation in BRICS cooperation

4.1 The drive for summit diplomacy

China and Russia will stabilize the cornerstone of BRICS cooperation through top-level dialogue and strategic coordination in the post-epidemic era. In the current "unprecedented changes of the century", the international political game is becoming increasingly hot, and the US and its allies are increasingly diversifying their tactics of attacking and isolating China and Russia, and divide and divide them. Therefore, the leaders of China and Russia should strengthen the communication and coordination mechanism of head of state diplomacy, not only to strengthen bilateral relations, but also to maintain strategic tacit understanding in BRICS relations and preserve the achievements of BRICS cooperation over the past decade. Balancing bilateral and multilateral relations, for example, in the BRICS cooperation platform, when dealing with the bilateral relations between China and India and China and Russia [11], taking into account their respective interests in the India-Russia relations. Second, Russia will strengthen strategic coordination, mobilize the enthusiasm of emerging countries, and innovate the BRICS+ cooperation model. Third, Russia will promote multilateral cooperation in global governance led by BRICS countries. Taking the epidemic response as an opportunity, it will promote cooperation among countries in global public health governance mechanisms and play a greater role in material supply chains, economic and trade cooperation, anti-epidemic technology exchange, and international assistance. Finally, Russia will work to reverse the unfavorable situation of international public opinion, especially in the post-epidemic period when it may face public opinion accusations from the West [12]. Russia will strengthen cooperation with China in terms of media propaganda strategies and interactions, cultivate strategic tacit understanding, and build consensus with emerging countries represented by BRICS countries to resist and counter Western public opinion smear attacks and maintain the national image of BRICS member countries.

4.2 Innovation of cooperation forms

New forms of cooperation, such as "BRICS+", help improve the quality of multilateral diplomacy. Russia's primary aim of promoting economic development and financial system reform through multilateral diplomacy of emerging countries was reflected in the Concept of the Russian Federation's accession to the BRICS mechanism signed in 2013 when the United Russia Party was in power, but the practice in recent years has yielded little result. Against the backdrop of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the United States and other Western countries, Russia's economy has not achieved the expected growth [13]. The BRICS countries have also sought to innovate their mechanisms, breaking away from the five-country framework and introducing the BRICS+ cooperation mechanism. Zheleznyak, Deputy Secretary of the General Committee of the United Russia Party, spoke highly of the innovative nature of the BRICS+ model, saying that the format of the BRICS "trinity" forum reflects the BRICS spirit of openness and inclusiveness. 37 political parties from 26 countries learn from each other and seek cooperation.

4.3 Promoting Public Diplomacy

We will continue to promote public diplomacy in BRICS countries and enhance the friendship between the societies and people of BRICS countries. People-to-people contact is an important glue for multilateral cooperation among BRICS countries. By concluding "friendship cities" with cities of other countries and carrying out economic, trade and humanistic exchanges, we can, to a certain extent, cross the geographical divide of BRICS countries and realize exchanges among their peoples. Through Chinese enterprises' foreign investment and economic and trade cooperation, we can realize civil interaction from a micro perspective, encourage enterprises to actively assume social responsibility while complying with the laws and regulations of the host countries, and build a good international image of multinational enterprises. We support the exploration of localization of media in BRICS countries, and use new media technology on the Internet to disseminate the truth in the local language and cultural context with subtle propaganda techniques, so as to increase foreign people's favorability towards China. In addition to indirect communication through traditional media and new media, direct communication based on human interaction should be strengthened to improve national quality and cultivate the awareness of international students and outbound tourists to protect the national image, so as to resolve prejudices and misunderstandings, achieve mutual understanding and reach consensus through face-to-face communication with people from different countries. Contribute wisdom to BRICS cooperation by using the exchange of think tanks of BRICS countries. We will carry out various forms of scientific exchanges such as the BRICS Think Tank Forum, encourage scholars to strengthen research on innovations and trends in BRICS mechanisms, and explore diverse innovative solutions for the "BRICS+" model [14].

5. Summary

In order to better maintain its position as a great power, Putin's government is actively seeking strategic cooperation with emerging countries under the pressure of the United States and NATO. BRICS is an important attempt to engage Russia in a new type of multilateralist cooperation. Russia has undertaken a series of reforms in all aspects of domestic and foreign affairs that have triggered an evolution in its domestic society and have had an impact on its diplomacy. After experiencing disappointment and skepticism, Russian elites and people tend to be rational and pragmatic in their attitude toward BRICS cooperation, and want to strengthen their dominance within the organization, increase Russia's national interests and enhance its national image by enriching the content of cooperation, innovating forms of cooperation, and conducting public diplomacy. The relationship between Russia, China and India, which are also located in the Eurasian continent, is an important

link and the main driving force in maintaining BRICS cooperation. The future of international multilateralism cooperation is becoming more nested and complicated, adding uncertainty to the future of BRICS cooperation.

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