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 “The World Land-Bridge: Peace on Earth, Good Will towards All Men”,
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From Panel 1 The World Land-Bridge: It’s Being Built!

Russia’s Strategic Engagement with BRICS: a Geostrategic Perspective

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Craig Isherwood: Our next speaker is Dr. Alexey Muraviev. Head of the Department of Social Sciences and International Studies at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. He is Coordinator of the International Relations and National Security programs and the founder and Director of the Strategic Flashlight forum on national security and strategy at Curtin.

He has published widely on matters of national and international security.

His research interests include problems of modern maritime power, contemporary defence and strategic policy, Russia’s strategic and defence policy, Russia as a Pacific power, transnational terrorism, Australian national security, and other.

Alexey is a member of the Australian Member Committee, Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region (AU-CSCAP), a member of Russia-NATO Experts Group, a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, a reviewer of the *Military Balance* annual defence almanac, a member of the Executive Committee, Australia-Russia dialogue, a member of the Research Network for Secure Australia, a member of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (WA branch), Royal United Services Institute of Western Australia, and other organisations and think tanks.

In 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010, the Australian Research Council (ARC) College of Experts nominated Dr Muraviev as an “expert of international standing”. He advises members of state and federal government on foreign policy and national security matters and is frequently interviewed by state, national and international media.

I’d like to welcome him to our conference.

Alexey Muraviev: Thanks very much, Craig, and good morning to all of you. First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the conference organisers for inviting me here, and for organising this really important event.

What I would like to do with you, and I am mindful of time, is to offer you five points with respect to the discussion about Russia's strategic engagement with BRICS, also on the basis of what has been partially covered earlier this morning—the geopolitical and geostrategic realities, and possibly arrive to a bit more happy conclusion. At the end of the day, the theme of the conference is to achieve prosperity through peace, or peace and prosperity at the same time.

But before that, let me take you back to November-December last year, and the anticipated “shirt-fronting” of the two greatest experts in martial arts, something that certainly was beefed up here in Australia, about what the Prime Minister was planning to do to Putin, and with Putin, not necessarily in exactly the same order. What came out of that? The initial discussions that the Prime Minister and Putin had had back in Beijing, at the APEC summit, if you remember a short interview when the Prime Minister left the room, didn't make him feel optimistic about the effect of shirt-fronting with someone who is a black-belt in judo.

But then came Brisbane. Apart from this anticipation, there was something else that came just days before that. It's something I describe as the “Big Oz” scare, which is something that reminded me of the good old war days, when the Australian media went ballistic, when a Russian naval task force, incidentally on purpose, arrived in the Coral Sea. It got even to the point, that some media commentators began making the point that two Russian ships are a sufficient invasion force to challenge Australian security. At that time, I was trying to defend the role of the Australian Navy, and give the guys some credit. If two Russian ships can take on Australia, why are we funding the Navy, which cannot really repulse them?

But, I think that, apart from all of the discussions that everyone anticipated that the Brisbane summit would have, and there was a lot of discussion about where Mr Putin was standing for the group photo, compared to the group photo he had at the APEC summit in China, just days before the [G20] summit, I think something was missing with regards to one of the strategic outcomes of the summit in Brisbane. That was the meeting of the leaders of state of the BRICS members, which somehow the Australian media conveniently overlooked, and it came as a genuine surprise when I made a couple of commentaries on ABC. Whilst we looked at the [Brisbane] summit as a way to restrain Russia, and put Mr Putin back in line, I think that the way the Russians looked at this, not only from the standpoint of engaging with the G20 member states, but also with BRICS, really signalled that they are paying more attention to this relatively young, but quite ambitious organisation. Certainly from that perspective, they considered their engagement with the Brisbane summit to be quite successful.

1. BRICS as a Strategic Platform

There is a strategic logic behind this. Clearly BRICS, and this challenges the traditional perception, does not represent the only platform that Russia can use now to interact with the outside world, or as a way to break the cordon sanitaire that's been imposed on it as a result of the crisis in Ukraine. It's a logical continuation of Putin's

policies towards re-integrating Russia, and repositioning Russia as a global player. And, certainly, the summit or the meeting in Brisbane was a logical continuation of the major strategic outcomes that the BRICS members achieved in Fortaleza in Brazil.

Georgy [Toloraya] already mentioned a number of them, so I'm not going to go through the details, but the two fundamental outcomes were the creation of what seems to be becoming an independent financial and, as a result, political capability, which would, if successfully implemented and having legs for growth, would provide the BRICS with lesser dependence, ideally, on western financial institutions, and greater leverage for engaging in strategic projects on their own.

Please, don't look at me as an economist or financial expert; I deal more with dark and scary stuff, so whenever something happens, people show interest in me, rather than ask me how my day was. But, even from that perspective, there was something else that the summit in Fortaleza managed to achieve. I think this is something that Georgy referred to in his remarks: the growing political unity that the BRICS leadership was showing. For the Russians, it was very important, because it happened at the time of the climax of the standoff with a number of western nations.

Fortaleza Declaration and Action Plan

25. We reiterate our strong commitment to the UN as the fundamental multilateral organization entrusted with helping the international community maintain international peace and security, protect and foster human rights and promote sustainable development. ...

26. We recall that development and security are closely interlinked, mutually reinforcing and key to attaining sustainable peace. We reiterate our view that the establishment of sustainable peace requires a comprehensive, concerted and determined approach, based on mutual trust, mutual benefit, equity and cooperation, that addresses the root causes of conflicts, including their political, economic and social dimensions. ...

27. We will continue our joint efforts in coordinating positions and acting on shared interests on global peace and security issues for the common well-being of humanity. We stress our commitment to the sustainable and peaceful settlement of disputes, according to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter. We condemn unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions in violation of international law and universally recognized norms of international relations. Bearing this in mind, we emphasize the unique importance of the indivisible nature of security, and that no State should strengthen its security at the expense of the security of others.

But certainly the declaration—and I'm showing you here three points from this rather longish declaration, which point to the geopolitical aspects, and they are really important, in my view, because they highlight the relative unity of the BRICS members about the transformation of the global world order, away from the unipolar concept, towards a greater multipolarity; and multipolarity driven also by the notion of respect for international law, respect for international and transnational institutions, like the United Nations, the power and authority of which was undermined over the past fifteen years. A message that is embedded in that particular part of the Fortaleza Declaration is that the members of the BRICS community, which can be regarded as the future powerhouses of the 21st century, would want to see the world operating in a slightly different way.

I'm not going to suggest for a moment, that BRICS is positioning itself as an alternative to the United States, or a geopolitical alternative to the EU or NATO, or other trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific treaties, but, rather, it's clearly a sign of independence and sovereignty of a number of major powers that represent a number of key continents.

In this sense, to me personally (and I want to make clear that here I'm speaking in my private capacity), BRICS represents a partial, at least, implementation of the grand design of Yevgeni Primakov. Yevgeni Primakov was a Russian foreign minister, under whom Russia redirected its course from re-alignment with the West, and adopted a more pragmatic approach. After that, Primakov became Russia's prime minister, at the time of the crisis in Yugoslavia. So he saw the country through challenging times. But it was Primakov, who actually began promoting the idea of multipolarity, initially proposing in the late 1990s the concept of the strategic alliance, the grand alliance Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi, which was entertained around 1998-99. In his latest memoirs, which I think were published around 2011, he actually made a reference to BRICS as a partial realisation of his grand idea.

The emergence of BRICS as a socioeconomic and a geo-economic framework is a manifestation that the world order is changing. And, obviously, there is a resistance, and a reluctance to accept that, and that obviously is manifested in how BRICS is being looked at in Australia and other countries. But I think this is something to be reckoned with, bearing in mind that it unites half of the world's population, the most dynamically developing economies, and, hypothetically, if we talk about the political and security dimension, it also brings together three nuclear-capable states. Having said that, I'm not suggesting for a moment that BRICS has a political or a security role to play, but it's something to bear in mind.

2. Russia's Strategic Logic

What is the logic for Russia to engage in BRICS and to rely on BRICS? Obviously the significance of BRICS, and the gathering in Brisbane and, before that, in Brazil, was highlighted by the ongoing strategic tension between Russia and the West—and, in this sense, the West is not united—over the crisis in Ukraine. There has

been a lot of debate in Australia, and I was part of this debate, about what the crisis in Ukraine means. I think that what's really missing here, is the extent of human tragedy.

Seventy years after the end of the most horrific war that the world has seen, we see a repetition of an unprecedented level of violence. And technically, it is in the heart of Europe. If you start looking at European geography from Gibraltar to Vladivostok, you'll find Ukraine conveniently sitting right in the middle. So the perception that Europe remains a relatively safe place has been severely undermined by this conflict, which is a result of the ongoing tension between Russia and the West, as well as the failure to recognise Russia as an equal partner, rather than looking at Russia as a bully. Certainly Russia's actions, or counteractions, depending on which position you're going to take, are driving the debate.

When I was saying five or ten years ago that Russia's might has been severely underestimated in Australia and elsewhere, this was met with scepticism; now this scepticism has transformed into this massive paranoia about what the Russians can do, and what we in the West cannot really do about them.

In this sense, I would like to bring in a bit of an optimistic outlook. The threat of a thermonuclear war is not as serious as it may seem, simply because there are not going to be any winners in the war. So, in this sense, trying to use military or political pressures on Russia is pointless. Russia is the only country—and I kept reminding, both in Canberra and in other places, that while there has been hyper-excitement about China's strategic rise, Russia remains the world's #2 military power, bearing in mind the strategic nuclear deterrent capabilities, and the only country that can hypothetically and physically destroy the United States. So, in this sense, trying to do something in terms of escalation with Russia would seem to be absolutely pointless, because there are not going to be any winners in that.

In this sense, the current standoff needs to be understood as a system of strategic errors of judgment—I would say, on both sides. There is no one side to blame, here. But, clearly, what I was saying before: the West's failure to recognise that Russia has as much of a strategic stake in place as the United States, as any other major players—and here, I want to quote Henry Kissinger, and he got fried in the States for the phrase, though I don't really see what is so heretical that he said there:

“The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. ... Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then.”

—really reduced opportunities for finding pragmatic outcomes there. As well [there is a] failure to recognise that what's really happening is a confrontation within the same civilisational space. I think that the Russians were advocating for a long time, that they are not part of some alien civilisation; in fact, they are part of greater Western Civilisation, and lately they have been referring to themselves as an alternative West. That is something interesting to think about, because you have probably heard of this notion of “conflict of civilisations”, that was, and continued to be entertained in the 1990s.

But Russia's reaction to Ukraine, which was knee-jerk itself, created this very short space for political manoeuvring when sanctions were imposed. And when we talk about the imposition of sanctions, we cannot forget that the Russians actually came back with their own set of sanctions. The sanctions led to counter-sanctions. And because there was not even an opportunity to have a dialogue: "OK, let's take a chill pill and think about this for a moment, before we actually open our mouths and go on the record", the elites now find themselves, in a way, [where] if they start, now, trying to engage in a more balanced dialogue, the perception would be that they are making concessions. As a result, they are backing down on the claims. So we are in a stalemate, where neither side is prepared to move and compromise. That is really worrying because, again, as I was saying to you before, people are suffering, and people are still dying, despite the fact that a relative ceasefire was reached.

And, again, this is not something that the Russians were not talking about or even alerting to. The traditional perception we have here, in Canberra, is that it all started when people in Ukraine removed a corrupt government, and the Russians decided to have an adventure in Crimea, because they didn't have enough beaches to spend their summer vacations on, and then they would go and occupy eastern Ukraine. But in reality, the Russians were effectively saying, "Look, guys, we have been exercising patience for the first 15 or 20 years since the end of the Cold War. We've been telling you that we are not happy about NATO moving eastwards, that we are not happy about the strategic balance of forces, because we've been reducing our military, while you've been absorbing new members and increasing the military."

The final red line on the sand was drawn by Putin when he was attending the Munich Security Conference back in 2007, a format which allowed him to be as blunt as possible.

"NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the [NATO] alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust...."

He was saying, "Look, guys, we mean business. We don't want this confrontation, but if you keep us pushed further"—and this is where he began referring to the Russian national pet, which is the bear; the bear, once driven into a corner, kind of loses its patience and he doesn't take prisoners.

I think that at that time, and partially I think it's the blame of the Russian elites, he wasn't taken seriously, because under Yeltsin the Kremlin was holding all sorts of messages, but they didn't follow it through with actions. But then came Georgia [in 2008], and the Russians were saying: "That's a bit way too sensitive for us. Imagine if we were starting something in Mexico, and how the United States would feel." And, obviously, Ukraine was, unfortunately, the logical continuation. So, again, this crisis could have been avoided if the West had listened to Putin and, in this sense, the Putin phenomenon needs to be recognised, as well. I'll make a comment about this later on.

What we have now is what the keynote speaker was saying: the expanded NATO, and the crisis in Ukraine as an attempt to further this geopolitical expansion closer to Russia's borders. And, once again, we are talking about a situation where NATO's military potential is moving towards Russia's heartland, when the flying time from the closest NATO bases to Moscow is about 15 minutes. So, in fact, we are revisiting the preamble to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was started by the Soviet decision, back then, to move missiles to Cuba.

What you see here, as a result, is the new-generation tactical missile, Iskander, that the Russians have developed and recently deployed to the Kaliningrad exclave—East Prussia. What, effectively, does it mean this system can do? It can effectively put the whole of Western Europe within its striking range. And, obviously, it has a nuclear-armed capability.

So, hypothetically, the Europeans placed themselves, or NATO placed themselves, in a situation where now they are within Russia's nuclear reach, even at the tactical level, leave alone the strategic level. I am not suggesting for a moment that this is the beginning of a massive confrontation, but certainly you cannot develop any normal strategic relations when you have your finger on a trigger and there is this sense of insecurity and mutual suspicion.

3. The Putin Phenomenon

In this sense, we need to recognise, and I think that this is where the West finds it incredibly difficult, the phenomenon of Putin. I would make an argument, and I have no problems making it, that he is now the world's most experienced leader. And Putin has the charisma that the majority of western leaders no longer possess. Give me a comparison, whoever is currently in charge of major European powers, or the United States, that would have the same degree of charisma and the same degree of impact. The western political elites no longer have political mammoths like Margaret Thatcher, or Kohl, or Mitterrand, or others. And also because Putin is not afraid of being politically incorrect. He speaks his mind. He is very open and transparent, and I think this is very appealing, not only to the Russians, but also to many in the West, who offered their support. Also on the basis of pragmatic conservatism. And whether we like it or not, when Putin speaks now, we shut up and listen. That's an important element: the personality factor is one of the major drivers of strategic decisions, in the past, in the present, and certainly in the future.

So, in this sense, Russia is not driving a short-sided agenda, as many may be thinking, but Putin I think has a fairly clear idea of where he wants Russia to be, and he also has the means, and understands the ways, to get Russia there.

What I want to bring in here, as well, is how it affects us. I use this slide to tease Australian students. What I find a bit surprising, is that in 70 per cent of the cases, the locals cannot even tell me what they see on the slide, apart from a guess that it may be somewhere in Sydney. [The Martello tower at Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour, whose construction was completed in the 1850s during the Crimean War, when a Russian attack on Australia, as Britain's colony, was feared. –ed.] That is a

symbol of Australia's perception of what Russia is. This long-standing threat perception, coming from the north, really overshadows some key facts.

4. The Context of Australia-Russia Relations

What I keep reminding my students, is that in terms of our engagement with Russia, we actually had a bit of a longer history, compared to our engagement with the United States. Yes, our diplomatic relations did not formally kick-start until the second or third year of World War II, and, yes, we've been taking turns looking at Russia as either ally, or our geopolitical rival. And, normally, it was in the context of Russia's strategic rivalry with somewhere else: either the British Empire, or the United States, etc. But, this is something important to remember: the level of engagement between Australia and Russia has been far longer and greater, in the historical sense, than with some other major powers we consider to be our partners.

And, certainly, until the crisis, we had seen some progress in regards to bilateral economic relations. I don't think many Australians know that Russia was the world's largest importer of raw beef. Certainly, compared to our trade with the United States and China, or Japan, it's not that fancy, but we managed to keep a volume of almost \$2 billion, just before this whole kerfuffle with sanctions started. So, I don't think, in times of economic turmoil, sniffing at \$2 billion annual trade is something you can really afford to do, even if you're a wealthy nation.

Incidentally, the level of political dialogue has been kept to the bare minimum, and that really represents a paradox. I think the U.S. Secretary of State visited Australia 16 times, recently; the Russian Foreign Minister visited only once, back in 2012, also to mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

So, there is a huge potential, but a potential that hasn't been realised. We have not featured prominently on the Russian radar screen, and Russia hasn't been really looking at Australia as a partner with which it needs to have much closer relations to what we have. So I think there is still opportunity to grow.

Perhaps something can be done, also, through engagement with BRICS.

5. Confrontation vs. Cooperation

I want to finish on a slightly positive note. Once again, 2015 is a year when we'll be celebrating 70 years since the end of the Second World War. Even if we are looking at what Russia and the United States can do, and I'm not suggesting that we are returning back to bipolarity, I think there is too much at stake, to simply quarrel about issues. We still need to remember that there is a great degree of space cooperation, and the Americans and the Russians are still together as joint crews on the International Space Station. The NASA program is very much dependent on the supply of Russia boosters, without which the U.S. heavy lifters cannot really take off.

There are, obviously, issues, and in this sense Russia and the United States, being permanent members of the UN Security Council, and nuclear superpowers,

have extra responsibility to ensure that there is no proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Cooperation on counterterrorism—what Georgy was referring to—and other matters is critical. Even if Russia was asked to leave the G8, which has now become the G7, I think there are far more interesting frameworks to cooperate, ranging from the G20 to Asia economic forums, etc. So, even now, I don't want you to have an impression that there is no dialogue happening. There are a lot of conversations happening, and there is a greater degree of potential, as it was demonstrated 70 years ago, when, only because of the combined effort of major powers—this is where we need to recognise that we fought together as allies, with the Soviet Union. We managed to defeat the global evil which was Nazism. We also need to recognise, and I think that would be particularly important this year, the sacrifice and the contribution that the Soviet Union made to the war effort, and certainly the role that they played in defeating the Nazis, and I think that this discussion about what really happened in World War II will become even more apparent in a month's time or so.

And finally, I want to finish off on just one example. Afghanistan 2010. One of the ISF's heavy lifters, a Chinook, suffered a mechanical failure, or perhaps was knocked down by the Taliban. It landed in enemy territory, and the crew and those on board were almost doomed to be captured. However, they were rescued by a Russian crew who was flying the Mi-26, the world's heaviest helicopter. They simply picked them up, and delivered them safely to the allied base. Apart from a demonstration that all the cool and sexy toys are not being produced by one power, it really demonstrates the true extent of cooperation, when countries, the big boys—or girls; I don't want to be sexist here—can really pull their hands together and achieve some common and positive results. So, to me, that slide represents that what we should really be aiming for, and working towards is collaboration and cooperation to achieve prosperity and peace.

Thank you.