BRICS, Bats, and Balls: Nation Building, Sporting Diplomacy, and the Politics of Mega-Sporting Events in the BRICS Countries

Derek Catsam
Professor of History
Kathlyn Cosper Dunagan Professor in the Humanities
The University of Texas of the Permian Basin
Senior Research Associate
Rhodes University
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Abstract

This article looks at the ways that BRICS nations have consciously used sport, including hosting football’s World Cup and other tournaments, the Olympic Games, and events such as the IRB Rugby World Cup and ICC Cricket World Cup in order to achieve political goals and garner international prestige. There is a great deal of variance between the BRICS nations and their use of sports, but, in every member country, sport has been part of the larger plan of nation building, broadly defined, even if not explicitly articulated as such. In just about every case, the impact of the events has been largely ephemeral even as the commitment has remained steadfast, serving as a reminder that the perceived role of sport in helping provide economic development remains higher in the public consciousness than the concrete realities of the intersection of sports, economics, and politics.

Key words: sports, BRICS nations, nation building, sporting diplomacy, mega-sporting events
Introduction

One of the most compelling sporting images of the late-20th century came when Nelson Mandela shared the stage with the South African Springbok rugby team after their upset victory in the 1995 IRB World Cup. Mandela had cannily understood that embracing the Springboks, who had embodied the country’s white supremacist policies under apartheid, might prove to be a way to bring South Africans together by getting Afrikaner Nationalists on board with the larger South African project. The subject of a best-selling book by John Carlin, a Clint Eastwood-directed feature film, *Invictus*, and an installment in the respected ESPN 30 for 30 documentary series, the 1995 World Cup embodied the attempts at nation building that have been so central to the narrative of the New South Africa since the negotiated settlements that led to the end of apartheid and the election of Mandela and the African National Congress in 1994. It is easy to overstate the meaning of the 1995 World Cup, the Springbok victory, and Mandela’s embrace of the Boks. It was a symbolically powerful moment but far less impactful than its chroniclers have sometimes made the events of 1995 out to be. Still, it was a nice moment, symbolically freighted, and useful in revealing Mandela’s and the ANC’s larger approach to building a non-racial South African nation.

South Africa is not alone among the BRICS nations of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa that have recently devoted themselves to using sports, and particularly the hosting of sporting mega-events, as a form of geopolitical positioning. This article will look at the ways that BRICS nations have consciously used sport, including hosting football’s World Cup and other tournaments, the Olympic Games, and events such as the IRB Rugby World Cup and ICC Cricket World Cup in order to achieve political goals and garner international prestige. There is a great deal of variance between the BRICS nations and their use of sports, but, in every member country, sport has been part of the larger plan of nation building, broadly defined, even if not explicitly articulated as such. In just about every case, the impact of the events has been largely ephemeral even as the commitment has remained steadfast, serving as a reminder that the perceived role of sport in helping provide economic development remains higher in the public consciousness than the concrete realities of the intersection of sports, economics, and politics. Politicians love using sports as a way to portray themselves as being in touch with the common

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12 See Michiel Foulon, “BRICS host sports events to boost prestige, just don’t call it ‘soft power’,” *The Conversation*, July 15, 2014.
person and pursue sporting development – whether in the form of hosting mega events such as the Olympics or World Cup or promising economic bounties from the publicly-funded building of stadia that virtually never occurs.

**BRICS in a Complex World**

The BRICS concept is fairly straightforward. Leading regional powers (with Russia and China certainly having near-superpower standing) with rapidly developing economies have formed an association based on mutual interest. The BRICS nations are all members of the G-20, represent about 50% of the world’s population (with all five countries being in the top 25 and China and India far and away the two most populous countries on Earth), and produce more than 20% of the world’s gross world product. Originally consisting of four countries (BRIC) whose leaders first gathered formally in 2006, the members invited South Africa, the African continent’s preeminent economic, political, and diplomatic power, to join in 2010. Unlike the Cold War-era treaty alliances NATO and the Warsaw Pact, which were mutual defense treaties based on global politics (and especially in the Warsaw Pact, more than a little coercion), the BRICS alliance is based on mutual economic, political, environmental, and cultural interests for countries that perceive themselves as developing economies.

At first, the membership of BRICS seems rather disparate. The five countries only intermittently share histories. Their economies and demographic profiles vary widely. They do not share a common language nor do they have particularly similar political traditions. The GDP’s of the BRICS nations are widely variable. In the broadest context, China dwarfs the GDP of the other four BRICS nations, with something north of $10,000 billion. Brazil, India, and Russia fall somewhere in the $2,000 billion range. And South Africa is far behind, with $275 billion or so.

But, at the same time, these raw numbers hide a far more complex picture. Taking population into account, South Africa ends up middle of the pack – not only in per capita GDP, but in a whole host of categories where South Africa’s much smaller population naturally does not match up in the aggregate but does reasonably well on a per capita basis. After all, China has a population of 1.4-billion, India 1.3-billion, Brazil more than 200-million, and Russia about 150-million. By comparison, South Africa has fewer than 60-million people. Naturally, in raw

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14 See, for example, “Ten charts that prove BRICS nations have little in common,” Quartz India, July 17, 2014.
numbers, it will lag. But it also is the African continent’s economic power by virtually any measure – Nigeria is alleged to have surpassed it in gross GDP in the last couple of years (but with thrice the population and thus a fraction of South Africa’s per capita GDP), but, by nearly any other measurement, South Africa’s economy is leaps and bounds ahead of any other country on the continent, Nigeria’s included. Any coalition of developing nations that excludes Africa cannot be all that serious, and any inclusion of Africa essentially has to include South Africa.

The BRICS nations also, pointedly, cover a broad swath of the non-American, non-Western European orbit. This aspect is a feature and not a glitch. Far from being a problem, these divergences from the American-Western European axis are exactly the point. The BRICS countries are dissimilar in myriad ways, but they share a common belief that globalization has not necessarily served them well, that neo-liberal policies have excluded them, and that a global economy based on an American-Western European axis has proven, not surprisingly, to favor America and Western European interests. This is not to say that the BRICS nations reject either globalization or neoliberalism, but rather that they want their share of the globalized, neoliberal cake. The BRICS nations do not necessarily want to upend the system. They just want a greater role within it. The BRICS coalition is not revolutionary. But it may be evolutionary.

One of the clearest concrete endeavors revealing the approach of the BRICS nations is the emergence of the New Development Bank, established at the 2014 BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, Brazil. Starting with an investment of $50 billion and giving each of the five countries an equal stake, the New Development Bank (informally sometimes called the BRICS Development Bank) provides something of a challenge, or at least an alternative, to the World Bank. The bank’s central headquarters are in Shanghai, but the first regional office of the NDB is in Johannesburg.

Thus, while there are those who argue that because the Eurasian BRICS nations of Russia, India, and China dwarf the economies (and geopolitical standing) of Brazil and South Africa that they ought to separate themselves into a tripartite RIC coalition, this proposal is to miss the point of the coalition to begin with. Indeed, to abandon Brazil and South Africa would be to provide restrictions that are anathema to the very idea of BRICS. A Russia-India-China coalition would seem superficially powerful. But its raison d’être would be minimal – suddenly an association geared toward a global recognition of aspirational powers and their interests would be limited to three Eurasian countries that are already powerful by virtue of their size and populations. Outreach to Brazil and South Africa did not represent charity, but rather a ruthless sense of how best to confront global politics. China has shown a consistent interest in Africa and would arguably be unlikely to abandon the South Africans, who would surely look askance at and possibly slow China’s presence on the continent South Africa so dominates. Brazil and South Africa certainly support one another’s presence in the coalition. And India too has

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17 Mail & Guardian online, 16 July, 2014.
historical connections with South Africa. Abandoning Africa and South America would send almost the precise opposite message that the BRICS are trying to cultivate in forging a new international coalition.

The BRICS nations are more likely to expand than to contract in the years to come. Argentina, Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Greece have all expressed interest in joining an expanded BRICS, either as full members or in some sort of affiliated capacity. And, while some of these countries make far more sense than others, and few might be truly appealing to the current BRICS configuration, it is telling that so many countries find potential BRICS membership to be compelling. Perhaps they look around at their world, realize that regional bodies are not helping them, international bodies ignore them, and going it alone is unappealing. A BRICS concept thus seems like a life preserver in a hostile economic climate, a new model for global cooperation that might provide them a real voice and ensure their economic and political place in the world.

Now, optimism about the idea of BRICS needs to be tempered by some stern economic realities. Brazil’s politics and economy are in shambles. South Africa’s look better only in comparison. Russia has experienced negative economic growth in recent years. India is by far the weakest economic performer on a per capita basis. Putin is a strongman, and China is no democracy – nor does it pay much mind to niceties like human rights in its engagement with the world. In other words, part of the appeal of the BRICS coalition has to be that the whole can amount to greater than the sum of its parts. BRICS represents a macrocosm of its constituents – flawed nations with great promise but significant liabilities looking to find a place in a post-Cold War world where America’s reliability, tenuous to begin with, looks quite likely to evaporate in the short term.

It is precisely this context that has perhaps made sporting development, or sporting prestige-seeking, such ripe fruit for the BRICS nations. Whatever their internal economic or political flaws, for the BRICS nations, participating in and especially hosting a wide range of global sporting events serves to put them on the map. In some of the countries, South Africa and Brazil most explicitly, sports have been seen as a tool for development. For Russia and China, hosting mega-events has been a way to show to the world their status as economic and political superpowers, deserving of being accorded treatment as such. India has been more subtle, pursuing both models implicitly and neither explicitly.

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18 Patrick Bond, a Political Economy Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand has been one of the voices expressing concerns about the viability of the BRICS coalition. See “BRICS fantasies and unintended revelations,” Pambazuka News, October 13, 2016, and “The odds are stacked against the Brics,” Mail & Guardian Business online, January 5, 2017. See also “BRICS nations struggling with Corruption, dwindling economic growth: Has the bloc lost its relevance?,” Firstpost, July 29, 2017, available at https://www.firstpost.com/world/brics-nations-struggling-with-corruption-dwindling-economic-growth-has-the-bloc-lost-its-relevance-3866799.html.
BRICS and Global Sporting Mega-Events

Brazil

Brazil hosted the 2014 World Cup and Rio de Janeiro the 2016 Olympics. In light of the country’s political and economic turmoil, it probably had no business doing so. Yet one of the issues that FIFA and the IOC face is a harsh reality: it is quite possible that the number of countries stable enough to host the World Cup or Olympics is rather small, and the number that has the infrastructural capacity to do so is smaller. And, given that FIFA and the IOC have not been inclined to allow countries to host events without raising them to what football’s governing body calls “FIFA Standards,” that creates a bit of a bind because it means that economically almost no one should host either of these mega events. Indeed, the literature is quite clear that building stadiums from the public coffers, for example, is nearly always a fool’s errand. And some have argued that perhaps there should be one Olympic site to diminish all of the bad things that go along with the bidding process and then even more so the pressures on host cities to build, usually at the expense of the masses.

Furthermore, the countries that could host the World Cup from a political and economic vantage point are all in Western Europe, North America, and a few select places in Asia – should Africa and Latin America be by definition excluded? This is a legitimate question that boosters of Brazil (and South Africa) have a right to ask. Furthermore, a world where arguably the best football-playing nation on earth, Brazil, is excluded from hosting the sport’s showcase event is a seemingly unjust one.

Yet, even with these caveats, the stark reality remains: Brazil probably should not have hosted the 2014 World Cup; it almost certainly should not have hosted the 2016 Olympics. Months after the Games, Sports Illustrated’s Tim Layden described what Rio’s Olympic facilities looked like not just in the days before the Olympics were to commence, but during the Games: “Construction materials lay in piles just beyond the perimeter fencing, and flimsy banners dangled from the ceiling.” This was more than apt metaphor. “For more than two weeks

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19 For my own reportage from the 2014 World Cup, see Derek Catsam, Beyond the Pitch: The Spirit, Culture and Politics of Brazil’s 2014 World Cup (Seattle: Amazon WGP, 2014).
20 For a comprehensive version of this argument, see Dave Zirin, Brazil’s Dance With the Devil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and the Struggle for Democracy (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).
21 The literature on this issue is massive, growing, and seems to be one of the few areas where economists have achieved near consensus. Perhaps the most notable article on this issue is John Siegfried and Andrew Zimbalist, “The Economics of Sports Facilities and Their Communities,” Journal of Economic Perspectives 14, Number 3 (2000): 95-114.
22 See, for example, John Nauright, “A single, permanent Olympic site would help us reclaim the integrity of sport,” The Conversation, November 16, 2015.
Brazil’s Games would hang by a thread, organized on a budget of pennies and a prayer. [...] They were the Olympics that barely happened, in a country that, like so many others, could not truly afford them.”

Brazil’s politics were quite literally crumbling even as the Olympics played out against the undeniably stunning tableaux that masks endemic poverty and crushing economic disparities. This juxtaposition embodied what one observer has called “Brazil’s long history of faking progress,” which has long been characterized by “the boundless cynicism of Brazil’s ruling class, for all the myriad ways in which it conjures the illusion of progress while precluding the possibility of change.” What was intended to be the ultimate expression of “Brazilian-ness” instead proved to be a muddle – the Olympics themselves came off reasonably successfully, but Brazil’s creaking infrastructure and fragile politics were not as resilient as the athletes who endured at times unsafe conditions, including exposure to sewage in some of the water sports, fear of the Zika virus, and a general sense that the Games went off despite Brazil’s conditions, not because of them. Just ten days after the Olympics ended, the Brazilian Senate impeached President Dilma Rousseff, who had been the target of protests for several years, including many protests against the World Cup and the Olympics. One observer summed the whole situation up as “Brazil’s Mega Event Dystopia.”

Russia

In the case of Russia, and likely China as well, the use of sporting mega-events might better be seen as part of a process of prestige-building (or prestige confirmation) than nation building. Russia hosted the Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 World Cup.

The bidding for and granting of Olympics and World Cups has been marked by various levels of corruption for more than a generation. Finalists have not had clean hands, the winning bidders certainly have not, and many individuals in both FIFA and the IOC, if not the organizations themselves, have been awash in kickbacks, graft, and general corruption.

That said, Russia appears to be raising the bar for corruption and venality. Hosting mega-events can be, as much as anything, vanity projects, and not many statesmen this side of Donald Trump can surpass Vladimir Putin in vanity, which manifests in a desire to restore his country to superpower status. Just as the Soviet Union used sport as a mechanism by which to wage Cold

25 Sports Illustrated, December 26, 2016, 32.
30 On the Sochi Games, see Goldblatt, The Games, 391-399, 424-429.
31 For example, see Heidi Blake and Jonathan Calvert, The Ugly Game: The Corruption of FIFA and the Qatari Plot to Buy the World Cup (New York: Scribner, 2015).
War by other means – including hosting the 1980s Olympics in Moscow – Putin’s Russia sees sport as a means by which to display national excellence.³²

Russia’s hosting of the Sochi Games further embodied great power hubris by hosting the Winter Games at a location in an unsuitable climate. The Sochi Winter Games were the most expensive Olympics in history, yet it is nearly impossible to tell how the funds were spent – or if they were spent on the Games at all. Russia further faced endemic corruption surrounding the sporting events themselves and faced myriad criticisms as a host for human rights issues, including but not limited to the country’s draconian anti-LGBT+ policies. Putin effectively consolidated his authoritarian control by using the Sochi games as an excuse to crack down on his civil society critics and to build up his state security apparatus.³³

Many of these issues could have been alleviated but for a political reality: autocratic nations are going to bend the rules and have the capacity to twist arms wherever they can. Few countries on earth these days can combine autocracy with great power pretensions quite like Russia.

**India**

India has been more circumspect about bidding for global mega-sporting events. The country has not put its hat in the ring for Olympiads or football’s premier event, perhaps because it does not excel at football. As of May 2018, India ranked 97th in the world, between Palestine and Armenia, but, a year earlier, India had ranked 132nd; by comparison, Brazil ranked 2nd, Russia 66th, South Africa 72nd, and China 73rd.³⁴ For a country with a population of some 1.3 billion, it is woeful at Olympic sports. India earned two medals in Brazil as by far the second largest nation on Earth – by contrast, China won the third most medals with 70, Russia the 4th most with 55, the host Brazilians 13th most with 13, and South Africa, by far the smallest BRICS nation, around 25 times smaller than India, won five times as many medals, ten, including as many golds as India won medals. Delhi did host the 2010 Commonwealth Games, which may indicate pretensions to do more, though there are no signs that it plans to bid for Olympiads or football’s World Cup, and the step up from the Commonwealth Games to the Olympics is considerable, especially as the former can tend to be part of a process whereby hosting duties simply become a function of it being a country’s “turn” among Commonwealth nations. India has also hosted the Asian Games twice, albeit long before the BRICS era, the last time being in 1982.

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As a consequence, however, India has played to its one undeniable global sporting strength: it has invested heavily in cricket, hosting or co-hosting the International Cricket Council World Cup in 1987, 1996, and 2011 with hosting duties assigned to it again in 2023.\(^{35}\) India also hosted the 2016 Twenty20 World Cup and plays host to arguably the most glamorous professional cricket circuit, the Indian Premier League. This makes complete sense. Unlike in global football or the Olympics, India is a major world force in cricket. As of May 2018, India ranked #1 in the International Cricket Council world men’s Test Cricket rankings, #2 in the men’s One Day International rankings, #3 in the men’s Twenty20 rankings, and #4 in the ICC Women’s Championship rankings. The only other BRICS nation in this conversation, and one that also has sought hosting duties for major cricket events, is South Africa, which ranked 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 6th in the same rankings.\(^{36}\)

Of course, India’s hosting duties merely serve to reinforce the country’s glaring inequities, and the glare of the lights of the IPL occurs against the backdrop of the BRICS nation with by far the lowest GDP per capita. But the same can be said for virtually any host of such events – it applies to all of the BRICS countries to varying degrees. The Brazil Olympics and World Cup took place virtually adjacent to favelas. The South African World Cups have taken place within eyeshot of sprawling townships. And so forth.

**China**

China has visibly used sport to cement its superpower status. It has done so by making committed efforts to excellence across a wide range of sporting activities. And it has done so by pursuing high-profile hosting duties of mega-events and by parlaying that hosting into international prestige.

Once it re-entered the Olympic movement in 1980, after a nearly three-decade hiatus, China was committed to hosting the quadrennial event.\(^{37}\) The most visible example of this devotion to using hosting as a way to showcase the country’s exalted standing came with the 2008 Olympics, which were held in Beijing.\(^{38}\) From the Opening to the Closing Ceremonies, the Chinese planners were clearly committed to showing the world China’s cultural reach, its economic capacity, its political will, and its geopolitical standing. Sports can provide a fabulous

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tableau for agitprop, and the Chinese mastered capturing the global television viewing public in its idealized displays of Chinese culture, history, know-how, and sporting prowess.

Beijing has also hosted the World Track and Field Championships, has twice hosted the FIFA Women’s World Cup (1991, 2007), and, in July 2015, China was awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics. China has also twice hosted the Asian Games, most recently in 2010, but is also scheduled to host again in 2022. As one of the most powerful nations on earth, China easily can stake a claim to being able to host global mega-events, and the country has used such events to reveal to the world their cultural, economic, political, and sporting might. Whether ordinary Chinese benefit from any of this is another question entirely.

South Africa

South Africa has arguably made the most explicit connection between sporting nationalism, hosting sporting mega events, and nation building, as the events surrounding the 1995 IRB World Cup (and Springbok victory) indicate. This is in no small part because of the way that sports, and especially rugby, played into the Afrikaner Nationalist project during the apartheid era, which in turn led to the sting of sporting isolation. Sport, a useful target for anti-apartheid opposition, has now become a crucial component of not only ANC policy but of more general national development.

South Africa continued the explicit nation-building project with the FIFA World Cup in 2010. We can debate how worthwhile it was for South Africa to host economically – it almost certainly was not worth the economic cost, though in its own inefficient way the Cup really did bring about a wide range of infrastructural development (the high-speed Gautrain, airport and highway improvements) and other benefits (expanded police, who continued after the games), while, at the same time, bringing about its share of FIFA-mandated boondoggles (white elephant stadia being by far the worst). It all seemed worth it when Siphewe Tshabalala scored the opening goal against Mexico, causing what may have been seismically measurable paroxysms of joy as South Africans echoed Zama Mosondo, the great African football broadcaster’s famous, wonderful goal scoring call of “Laduuuuuuuma!” (which means “He Thunders!” in Zulu.) Bafana Bafana went out in the first round, becoming the only hosts to do so. They actually played quite well, going out effectively on the worst red card decision in the history of the World Cup, when Bafana keeper Itumeleng Khune was shown the door for a challenge against

39 See Derek Catsam, “The Death of Doubt?: Sport, Race, and Nationalism in the New South Africa,” Georgetown Journal of International Affairs XI, #2, Summer/Fall 2010.
40 The literature on South Africa is vast, but a useful starting point is Douglas Booth, The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa (London: Frank Cass, 1998).
designated heel Luis Suárez during a 3-0 loss. The South Africans beat the French handily, but by only one goal, not enough to send them though. Of course, we now know that the bidding process for the 2010 event was likely fixed. On the other hand, South Africans somewhat rightfully felt robbed by the bidding process for the 2006 Cup, which went to Germany. Nonetheless, the 2010 event was quite clearly framed in the context of nation building, and most South Africans and hundreds of thousands of tourists emerged with a good feeling about the state of the country, an admittedly mushy but not necessarily invalid measure.

South Africa, a major player in world cricket (albeit one that always seems to choke in major tournaments), has validated its standing in the sport by engaging in hosting duties in that sport’s key events. South Africa co-hosted the 2003 ICC Cricket World Cup with Kenya and Zimbabwe (making it a consciously African World Cup – of fifteen venues, twelve were in South Africa; of 54 matches played, 46 were in South Africa). The Proteas also hosted the ICC World Twenty20 (the official name for the World T20, or T20 World Cup) in 2007. Tellingly, after the South Africans washed out in the 2015 One-Day World Cup and the 2016 T20 event, neither of which they hosted, the country went through a bout of head scratching and self-assessment. Within a year, the country has become a, if not the, dominant force in all three versions of cricket, and they have done so with the most transformed, which is to say racially representative, which is to say black, teams in South African history, showing that racial transformation and quality on the playing fields do not have to be mutually exclusive. Racial transformation is the single component at the heart of the South African nation-building project.

Cape Town bid unsuccessfully for the 2004 Olympics, and both Cape Town and Durban have considered putting in bids for future Summer Games. South Africa cannot justify hosting an Olympic Games. Politics have also intervened in recent attempts to bid for various mega events. In April 2016, Sports Minister Fikile Mbalula decided to get tough with four sports bodies, cricket, netball, athletics, and rugby, for their lack of progress in achieving racial transformation, not only on the playing fields, courts, and track, but also in their higher structures. There had long been debates about various forms of transformation in sport with government part of the discussions, but this was the clearest gnashing of teeth on the part of the government, with Mbalula announcing that the four codes would be prohibited from bidding for hosting duties for international events for their respective codes. Perhaps all sporting codes were equal in Mbalula’s announcement, but rugby was quite clearly more equal than others. South African Rugby Union (SARU) was in the process of preparing to bid to host the 2023 World Cup, a bid that controversially went to France.

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Conclusion

“Nation building” is a malleable concept. Thus, the use of sports for nation building has to be seen as fluid. In each of the BRICS nations, the hosting of mega-sporting events has been a part of defining and shaping the host nation. For countries such as China and Russia, hosting Olympics or World Cups can best be seen as validating their superpower self-conceptions, their place at the pinnacle of geopolitics. Both Russia and China are nations with enormous economies, powerful militaries, permanent seats on the UN Security Council, and vast political influence. Alongside the United States (and the aggregation that is the EU, and possibly the UK after Brexit), these countries see themselves as great nations and hosting Olympics, World Cups, IAAF Championships and the like, and their performance at these events, thus validate their standing.

India is in a different category. Massive but poor, perhaps regionally powerful, India is a country on the go, but with no claim to the global status of Russia or China. India also has been the most circumspect, and perhaps the most savvy with regard to hosting major global events. Not a player in the Olympic Movement, India has stuck to what it does well: hosting major events in the one sport where India is a true force. India has avoided the temptation (or had a realistic self-assessment) of pursuing IOC or FIFA hosting duties and has stuck to what it does and knows best. Some of the same issues arrive with cricket, of course – hosting prestige events in cricket still shows the disparities between have and have-nots and serves as a reminder of why, even when sticking to cricket, India devotes resources that it could have used better to help provide for its teeming masses.

Brazil and South Africa more clearly fit the model of countries using sports to strive for a status that is more aspirational toward what they want than reflective of where they are. Brazil showed the true pitfalls in doing so, as the government almost literally disintegrated even as the country hosted the world’s two grandest sporting events. South Africa is actually quite well equipped to host IRB World Cups – it has the facilities in place, the cities to host fans and athletes, and, despite some recent hiccups, is clearly one of the sport’s true powers. Furthermore, at least symbolically, the connection between the rugby World Cup and nation building – in this case, the process of transformation from apartheid to non- or multi-racial democracy – is well known, and indeed has become the stuff of mythology. The FIFA World Cup was more of a reach, though the country did acquit itself well as hosts, even if the country’s leaders succumbed to the corruption that has become endemic to World Cup bids and even if the price tag did not represent the sagest of investments. South Africa cannot justify hosting an Olympic Games, and the failed Cape Town 2004 bid was probably a turn of good fate. Some still fantasize that Cape Town or Durban might one day host an Olympics, but, despite some talk in 2016 of Durban trying to bid for the 2024 Games, that does not appear to be in the cards any time soon, and hopefully wisdom will prevail for a generation or more.
At least one study has suggested that rather than commit to sporting mega-events, South Africa might be better off focusing on recurring localized sporting events, such as the Comrades Marathon. The argument may well be applicable across the BRICS nations and beyond. But one imagines that the siren song of the mega-event will continue to lure countries blinded by the pursuit of prestige and more concerned about what mega-events might say about them to the rest of the world rather than what those events might actually do for the countries and their people.

Nation building through sport and through the hosting of mega sporting events is thus a malleable concept that can be shaped to the needs of the countries doing so. The BRICS countries have shown a remarkably variegated approach to hosting such events and to the role that they play in the different countries. These events fit into larger historical, social, political, and economic contexts. Above all, they prove that countries, like people, can be fueled by the pursuit of status.