

RIC, A TRIANGLE THAT IS STILL IMPORTANT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

Last month, on June 23, a few eyebrows were raised when India decided to attend a (virtual) meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China (RIC). Amid the tensions on the Line of Actual Control, the dominant calls were for a more decisive westward shift in India's foreign policy. A RIC meeting seemed incongruous in this setting.

The leaders' statements at the meeting reflected their divergent preoccupations. The Chinese Minister did not see the irony in his call for opposing bullying practices, rejecting power politics and supporting the rule of law in international relations. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticised unilateral coercive measures to settle scores with geopolitical rivals and topple regimes. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar pointedly emphasised that for a durable world order, major powers should respect international law and recognise the legitimate interest of partners.

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When the RIC dialogue commenced in the early 2000s, the three countries were positioning themselves for a transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. It was not an anti-U.S. construct; all three countries considered their relationship with the United States an essential prop to their global ambitions. The RIC shared some non-West (as distinct from anti-West) perspectives on the global order, such as an emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity, impatience with homilies on social policies and opposition to regime change from abroad. Their support for democratisation of the global economic and financial architecture moved to the agenda of BRIC (with the addition of Brazil).

The initial years of the RIC dialogue coincided with an upswing in India's relations with Russia and China. The advent of President Vladimir Putin reinforced the political, defence and energy pillars of the India-Russia strategic partnership. With China, the 2003 decision to bring a political approach to the boundary dispute and to develop other cooperation, encouraged a multi-sectoral surge in relations. An agreement in 2005, identifying political parameters applicable in an eventual border settlement, implicitly recognised India's interests in Arunachal Pradesh.

Simultaneously, India's relations with the U.S. surged, encompassing trade and investment, a landmark civil nuclear deal and a burgeoning defence relationship that met India's objective of diversifying military acquisitions away from a near-total dependence on Russia. There was a strategic sub-text: as China was rapidly emerging as a challenger to its global pre-eminence, the U.S. saw value in partnering with a democratic India in Asia. Former U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice writes about this in her memoirs.

Transformations in the external environment impacted on these political equations. Among other irritants, China went back on the 2005 agreement, launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, worked to undermine India's influence in its neighbourhood and expanded its military and economic presence in the Indian Ocean.

The texture of the relationship with Russia also changed, as India-U.S. collaboration widened — in defence and the Indo-Pacific. As U.S.-Russia relations imploded in 2014 (after the annexation/accession of Crimea), Russia's pushback against the U.S. included cultivating the Taliban in Afghanistan and enlisting Pakistan's support for it. The western campaign to isolate Russia drove it into a much closer embrace of China — particularly in defence cooperation —

than their history of strategic rivalry should have permitted. Thus, the RIC claim of overlapping or similar approaches to key international issues, sounds hollow today.

Having noted this, the Russia-India-China engagement still has significance. India is in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is driven by Russia and China and includes four Central Asian countries. Central Asia is strategically located, bordering our turbulent neighbourhood. A sliver of land separates Tajikistan from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan's membership of SCO and the potential admission of Iran and Afghanistan (as member states) heighten the significance of the SCO for India. Growing Chinese influence is testing the informal Russia-China understanding that Russia handles the politico-security issues in the region and China extends economic support. It is important for India to shape the Russia-China dynamics in this region, to the extent possible. The Central Asian countries have signalled they would welcome such a dilution of the Russia-China duopoly. The ongoing India-Iran-Russia project for a sea/road/rail link from western India through Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia, is an important initiative for achieving an effective Indian presence in Central Asia, alongside Russia and China.

The bilateral arms of the India-Russia-China triangle will also remain important. The defence and energy pillars of India's partnership with Russia remain strong. Access to Russia's abundant natural resources can enhance our materials security — the importance of which has been highlighted by COVID-19. With China too, while the recent developments should accelerate our efforts to bridge the bilateral asymmetries, disengagement is not an option. We have to work bilaterally and multilaterally on a range of issues, even while firmly protecting our interests on the border, in technology and the economy.

The elephant in the RIC room is the Indo-Pacific. For India, it is a geographic space of economic and security importance, in which a cooperative order should prevent the dominance of any external power. China sees our Indo-Pacific initiatives as part of a U.S.-led policy of containing China. Russia's Foreign Ministry sees the Indo-Pacific as an American ploy to draw India and Japan into a military alliance against China *and* Russia. India's focus on economic links with the Russian Far East and activation of a Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor may help persuade Russia that its interests in the Pacific are compatible with our interest in diluting Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific; this also accords with President Putin's concept of a Greater Eurasia.

The current India-China stand-off has intensified calls for India to fast-track partnership with the U.S. This is an unexceptionable objective, but is not a silver bullet. National security cannot be fully outsourced. India's quest for autonomy of action is based on its geographical realities, historical legacies and global ambitions — not a residual Cold War mindset.

As noted, RIC dynamics are sensitive to the configuration of the U.S.-Russia-China triangle. This configuration changed in 2008 (the global economic crisis) and again in 2014 (Crimea's accession to Russia). COVID-19 could trigger another change, which could be modulated by the outcome of the U.S. Presidential elections. The nature and impact of this change is, for now, an unknown unknown.

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