

Does the Russia-India-China “Troika” has any Future?

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Sergei V. LAVROV, March 2025

While the geopolitical and geoeconomic center of gravity is shifting from the West to emerging powers in Asia, the since long established RIC format — a kind of „geopolitical triangle” between the major Eurasian powers Russia, India and China — has so far failed to significantly influence global affairs. The article analyses the reasons for this and explores, whether RIC could still become a factor to reckon with.



Meeting of RIC Foreign Ministers in Wuzhen, China, 27th of February 2019 (source: https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/photo/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1454776/)

RIC Devalued by Divergence of Interests

When then Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov unveiled the proposal of establishing a Russia-India-China (RIC) strategic triangle in New-Delhi at the end of 1998, it was a symbolic expression of tectonic shifts in the global architecture and of the emerging post-Cold War multipolar world order. Primakov’s visionary proposal was borne out of Russia’s disillusionment with the West, as well as

from his recognition that China and India will form future power centers in the emerging new world order.¹ It was hoped that such a Grand Eurasian “troika” – a trilateral format of policy coordination between the three largest Eurasian continental countries – could become a leading geopolitical structure that would determine strategic developments in Greater Eurasia in the interests of the three “without outside interference”.

Today, just over 25 years later, it is clear that Russia has failed to translate RIC into an effective multilevel mechanism of political coordination and interaction in the “troika” format. Russian diplomatic sources recently complained even of difficulties to arrange a meeting at the level of foreign affairs ministers in the RIC format.²

The main reason for this is the increasing divergence and even conflict of interests among the three participating parties, especially China and India. Prime examples for the latter are Sino-Indian political rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and economic competition between the two Asian giants caused by their growing economic and political ambitions, not to mention direct military border clashes in 2020 and 2022. One issue, often pointed out by Indian scholars, is the obvious “asymmetry of capabilities” among the three parties or “imbalance of the sides of the triangle” with Russia and China both enjoying top political status as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, while India has been left out of this global elite club.

Moreover, in 2023, India announced the *India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)* as a pointedly alternative project to China’s *Belt and Road Initiative* extending the contest between the two countries into the area of competing trans-Eurasian trade routes, thus directly negatively affecting prospects of promoting inclusive economic initiatives in Eurasia. Lately, the India-China rivalry assumed yet another fundamental dimension with both powers striving to woo developing countries of the Global South by advocating different modernization and governance models.

Prospects for RIC political cooperation have also been significantly impacted by shifts in the strategic posturing of members of the “troika”, as manifested by India’s gradual drifting towards closer security partnership with the US in the Indo-Pacific, while relations of China and Russia with the US became increasingly conflict-ridden and confrontational.

In China, there are complaints about India opening the way for US political and military penetration into Eurasia through various bilateral US-India arrangements as well as through multilateral initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving India, the US, Australia, and Japan known as Quad. New Delhi, in turn, is wary of Beijing's alleged attempts to "encircle" India by supporting Pakistan and by extending, through its "String of Pearls" strategy, trade and military infrastructure in the Indian Ocean.

¹ Frank O'Donnell, Mihaela Papa. India's multi-alignment management and the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle. *International Affairs* 97(3). April 2021. Pp. 801-22. DOI:10.1093/ia/iiab036 or P.808, 811; N.Kapoor. [RIC, BRICS and SCO: The Pandemic and Its Consequences — Valdai Club](#).

² Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov [indicated](#) last summer at the 10th Primakov Forum readings that Moscow has proposed such a meeting “about a year ago, and recently we revisited the idea again. But so far, our Indian friends believe the situation at the (India-China) border should be resolved first. We understand.”

These mutual anxieties of India and China have posed a serious dilemma for Russia. At a time of deep conflict with the West, Russia could neither afford to lose support of China nor alienating India, two of her most important partners. Therefore, Russia has been conducting a delicate balancing act avoiding taking sides. Russian media, scholars, and officials usually downplay or dismiss Indian fears of Chinese “encirclement” as unfounded or imaginary, while behind the scenes mediating dialogue between China and India. At the same time Russia has been actively promoting defense collaboration with both, China and India, which also included the supply of sophisticated weapons.

That said, the trend of closer security ties of New Delhi with Washington has also been observed with growing anxiety in Russia whereas this reached a level that Moscow, from time to time, indicates its displeasure. For instance, in September 2022, the Russian ambassador to India publicly [remarked](#) that cooperation in the RIC format “is completely different from the politics of some powers who purposefully exacerbate divisions between India and China for their geopolitical games”. Nevertheless, Russia’s reticence to chide India has caused disappointment in China, which expected a more robust support from an “all-weather” strategic partner.

As a possible way to overcome such frictions, Russia has been advancing the idea of conducting joint naval exercises to protect maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean involving all three parties. This has so far remained an idea though as Russia has so far only managed to establish regular bilateral, Russian-Indian and Russian-Chinese, naval exercises, whereas it is unclear whether they might ever evolve into trilateral exercises.

Lack of Institutionalization

All these diverging interests are part of the explanation why the level of institutionalizing within the RIC format has remained remarkably low. This also points to inherent limitations of RIC as a potential trilateral entity and a lack of common or unifying practical policy objectives.

A stark example is that, while the three RIC countries declare non-acceptance of the US or Western domination in world politics, neither India nor China have so far been ready to put their ties with the USA at risk and, albeit maintaining friendly relations with Russia, have shown no interest to join Moscow in its current confrontation with the West.

Another part of the explanation is that India and China have prevailed in their traditional preference for informal alignments as opposed to establishing formalized treaty-based intergovernmental structures which Russia favours.

As such, already by 2015, Russian observers tacitly acknowledged that the vision for RIC as a geopolitical trilateral alliance has evolved into seeing RIC as an “informal platform for political dialogue”. Accordingly, RIC’s political philosophy was amended as standing for “three Not’s” – not a block, not confrontational, not against third parties.

Given strained Indo-China relations as contrasted to growing ties along the Russia-China and Russia-India lines, there seems more reason for the current RIC alignment to be described as several axes rather than a triangle. Moreover, failure of RIC to come up with concrete cooperation

programs or institutional work also suggests that RIC is currently more about ‘goodwill’ and less about ‘strategic cooperation,’ not to speak of a true politico-strategic entity.³

That said, it should not be forgotten that RIC played a vital role in translating converging interests of Russia, India, and China for a more equitable global governance system into concerted policies that led to the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS – now major elements of the global order. Given the geo-political dynamics in the first quarter of the 21st century, that was maybe the most RIC was able to achieve.

Has RIC a Future?

Despite all these problems and the fact that RIC has become and remains [overshadowed](#) by the SCO and BRICS, there is still a will of all three parties to continue RIC engagement. Suffice to mention a meeting of RIC foreign ministers convened by Russia in June 2020, despite India and China having, at that time, been engaged in the most serious military border clash in 40 years⁴ or that the 19th round of the *RIC Academic Forum* held in October 2024 showed clear interest in preserving such lines of communication. Undoubtedly, all three RIC countries as the major Eurasian continental powers have compelling reasons to work together to manage regional affairs and remain an influential voice on issues of global governance and security at a time of growing uncertainties and turbulence in world affairs. RIC moreover also offers inner circle discourse within multilateral alignments such as BRICS and the SCO.

As such, RIC might still have a future, if attempts to chase the currently unattainable phantom of a trilateral geopolitical alliance would be substituted by efforts to become a more practical and issue-focused platform concentrating on regional development issues relevant to all three countries.

Potential areas for such practical collaboration could be the trans-Eurasian network of trade corridors or joint development projects in the Arctic region. Given that the three countries are all, respectively, major suppliers or consumers of hydrocarbons and fertilisers, collaboration in such fields would also seem sensible and could have a significant impact on Eurasian energy and food markets.

In addition, the continuation of trilateral consultations on strategic stability in a regular and frank manner may generate more trust between Beijing and New Delhi.

From the Russian perspective, such an approach would also be in line with the notion recently [postulated](#) by Fyodor Lukyanov, a leading Russian political science analyst, according to whom it would be beneficial for Russia to moderate her aspirations and concentrate her available resources on promoting her interests in Eurasia. According to Lukyanov, the balance between globalism and regionalism has tilted in favor of the latter and it is the regional powers who, through exerting their influence, gain most by managing stability and sources of growth in their respective neighboring environment. As such, one might argue that the basic, bottom-line interest of Russia as a Eurasian continental power is

³ Sharma [Russia-India-China: Assessing Possibilities](#); N.Kapoor. Ibid.

⁴ During that meeting, the three states also committed to initiating a parallel RIC defense ministers’ dialogue, which constitutes the most substantive institutional deepening of the alignment in years.

that tensions between India and China should never escalate to the level of a major military confrontation and that both Asia giants should remain friendly or not become less neutrally predisposed towards Russia and its policies.

Accordingly, what really matters for Russia in any RIC engagement is to build up bilateral strategic communications with both China and India, with an emphasis on deepening strategic links with India to a level somewhat comparable to the “all-weather” strategic partnership it enjoys with China and thereby preventing a potential disruption of an integral Eurasian geostrategic space along the Russia-China *versus* India-USA lines.

Curiously enough the most likely catalyst for a potential reinvigoration of RIC is arguably the possibility that the unilateralism of President Trump’s second US administration may reawaken the interests of the RIC countries for a closer get-together in their responses to Trump’s global affairs conduct.

In view of all the above, Primakov’s basic idea of creating a trilateral format of collaboration between Russia, India and China may still work, through major transformation of the RIC “troika” into a more practical and issue-focused platform to foster joint activities in areas of common interest to all its members, rather than in the form of a geopolitical alliance as was originally envisioned.

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