

## RIC TRIANGLE AND ITS IMPACT ON SOUTH ASIAN POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

*The Russia-India-China (RIC) strategic triangle is perhaps an under-emphasised theme in the discourse on multi-polarism and emerging groups in that direction. The three countries are rising pillars in a multi-polar globe and their contribution to international economic growth and peace and stability is beyond doubt. The countries' participation in, and being part of, various crucial groupings such as BRICS and G-20 and their economic growth despite global economic slowdown, and their contribution to the reshaping of global decision making process is acknowledged by the nations of the world. The point is: whether this grouping should continue its ad hoc like nature and end up in annual foreign ministerial meetings, or the members need to synergize their activities to match their potential?*

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**Keywords:** RIC, Multi-Polarism, Decision Making, BRICS, G-20.

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### Introduction

The RIC strategic triangle concept, though older than the BRICS concept, is a post-cold war phenomenon. It was originally conceived by the former Russian Foreign Minister, later to become Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov. Primakov was considered to be a Eurasianist. Primakov became Prime Minister in 1998. And the same year during his visit to New Delhi he pitched for a strategic triangle between Russia, India and China. His underlying arguments were the following. After the end of the Cold War, the world is no more divided into blocs. Rather, it is a world of multi-blocs or multi-poles. The rise of regional powers as well as rise of regional organizations complemented such a characterization of the world order. He argued that in the evolving global order, the three powers must come together to reshape the global order. Russia and India, despite post-cold war changing equations and despite their adaptation to market economy and globalization, shared these viewpoints. The triangle as envisioned by Primakov took a concrete shape in 2001.

- RIC is a strategic grouping that first took shape in the late 1990s under the leadership of Yevgeny Primakov, a Russian politician as "a counterbalance to the Western alliance.
- The group was founded on the basis of ending its subservient foreign policy guided by the USA and renewing old ties with India and fostering the newly discovered friendship with China.
- Together, the RIC countries occupy over 19% of the global landmass and contribute to over 33% of global GDP.

### Organizational Structure

The RIC has many trilateral forums like RIC Trilateral Experts Meeting on Disaster Management, Trilateral Business Forum, and Trilateral Academic Scholars Dialogue.

### Impact on World Politics

The global situation has not fundamentally changed since the cold war. The crises still persist or rather galore. The conflicts in the Middle East or in Korea, or the rising menace of extremism and terrorism, or the financial problems have contributed to uncertainty factor and raised questions about the sustainability of the prevalent global order. The last meeting of the foreign ministers in Moscow in April 2012 voices some of these concerns.

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- The leaders criticized North Korea for rocket launch but at the same time opposed any sanctions against the peninsular country, and advocated for a peaceful solution through six-party talks. The RIC in that sense can play the role of a balancer in global political and economic processes.
- Two of the members are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the most powerful body with wider acceptance among the nations.
- All the three countries' global visions converge on many accounts.
- All of them are in favour of coordinated mechanisms to counter terrorism and extremism, all of them favour a peaceful resolution of crisis in Syria, in case of Iran all of them argue for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.
- In case of Afghanistan, the three countries share a common vision of a peaceful and stable polity in the war-torn country after the International Security Assistance Force departs.

#### Relevance of RIC for India

- **Strategic Balance:** Along with JAI, India would do well to give RIC the same importance. The groupings like the Quad and the JAI essentially revolve around the Indo Pacific and will confine India to being only a maritime power when it is actually both a maritime and continental power.
- **Forum for Cooperation:** Even though India, China and Russia may disagree on a number of security issues in Eurasia, there are areas where their interests converge, like, for instance, on Afghanistan. RIC can ensure stable peace in Afghanistan and by extension, in Central Asia.
- Regular RIC interactions could also help the three countries identify other issues where they have congruent views like the volatile situation in West Asia.
- **Creation of New Order:** Contribute to creating a new economic structure for the world. The US apparently wants to break down the current economic and political order. While the existing structure is not satisfactory, the RIC could offer some suggestions which could be acceptable to the US.
- **Governance over Arctic:** With the Northern Sea Route opening up due to climate change, the RIC has a common interest in ensuring that it is not left to the West and Russia alone and that India and China also have major say in rules governing the Arctic route.
- **Other Aspects:** They could work together on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

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 democratization 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, defense 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.

#### Bone of Contention

There are no doubt differences among the three members, but a closer scrutiny reveals similarities of aspirations trump over dissimilarities of perceptions. India and China have differences over their border demarcations, the three countries have differing interests in Asia-Pacific, but that should not slight the prospects of gains from cooperation. The potentials of cooperation between these three countries are really vast. While Russia is energy rich country, both India and China are energy hungry countries. There can be vast networks of transport and communication between the three countries by exploring the Silk Road through Afghanistan and Central Asia with links with these three countries. In arms sector there are ample scope of cooperation as well. It is the economic diplomacy which needs to be prioritized in relations, while contentious political issues can be dealt with a spirit of moderation and negotiation. In this political sphere too, there has been tremendous progress. There has been no case of

border skirmishes between these countries for decades together, and particularly in the context of India and China the high-level meetings between national security advisors between the two countries is a regular phenomenon, which has helped in moderating tensions at borders.

#### **Bottlenecks for India**

- India has traditionally avoided taking sides in international politics, especially between the great powers, preferring its traditional nonalignment. However, China's hostile attitude towards India in recent years is increasingly forcing India to confront.
- This makes it difficult to see how engagements through platforms such as RIC, are going to alter the basic conflictual nature of relations between India and China.
- Even though Russia has remained an old friend for India, it is increasingly under stress to follow China's dictates. e.g. earlier, it openly opposed the Indo-Pacific concept at the Raisina Dialogue.
- On issues such as Jammu and Kashmir, which China raised at the UN Security Council, Russia preferred taking a middle position, not supporting India's stand entirely.

Within a few years, however, RIC began to lose much of its relevance for India after the US granted de facto recognition to the Indian nuclear weapons programme, agreed to cooperate with India in the civil nuclear sector, spearheaded India's admission into the global nuclear and missile non-proliferation regime, and initiated policy measures to facilitate India's emergence as a major Asian and world power.

Simultaneously, the challenges posed by China to India's diplomatic and security interests began to intensify, with China asserting expansive territorial claims, initiating a series of border crises and standoffs, protecting Pakistan and its terrorist proxies from international sanctions, and expanding its diplomatic and military footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.

Nevertheless, RIC continues to serve two related purposes for India. One, it provides a forum to remain engaged with China, which is a powerful neighbor and an important actor on the Asian stage and in international affairs at large. Two, RIC is an incentive for Russia to remain neutral on India-China disputes as well as to exercise friendly persuasion and restraint on China.

#### **The Way Forward**

Perhaps this is time to further synergies the trilateral acts by institutionalizing the meetings in terms of a permanent secretariat and permanent representatives. Besides foreign ministers, the triangle can also involve highest officials, President in case of Russia and China and Prime Minister in case of India. Perhaps that is an emerging imperative of the post-cold war global order. India is committed to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the border areas and RIC would give the platform for resolution of differences (along the Indo-China Border) through dialogue.

Moreover, the RIC forms the core of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS as greater cooperation between China, India and Russia would lead to strengthening of both SCO and BRICS.

The RIC is a significant multilateral grouping, because it brings together the three largest Eurasian countries which are also incidentally geographically contiguous. RIC, hence provides a worthwhile platform to discuss issues like West Asia, Afghanistan, climate change, terrorism, regional connectivity, tensions on Korean Peninsula, and so on.

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