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02 April 2024– DOI: [10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5641.C269](#)

COMMENT 269 – Russia-India-China: Assessing Possibilities



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Russian aspirations regarding the Russia-India-China strategic triangle

The concept of the India-Russia-China (RIC) triangle was first proposed by Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1998 as “[a counterbalance to the Western alliance](#)”. It took shape in the early 2000s. The first RIC meeting of heads of government was held in 2006; the [second](#) took place only in 2018. However, there have been regular RIC [Foreign Ministers](#) meetings. These meetings have been held on the strategic aspect of cooperation. The RIC forms the [core](#) component of multilateral forums such as BRICS and the SCO. Recently, Vladimir Putin unveiled the geopolitical concept of “Greater Eurasian Partnership” with RIC at the [centre](#). However, the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes between India and China put this to test. Russia undoubtedly played the role of a balancing force in this conflict, particularly via the virtual RIC foreign [ministers](#) trilateral in June 2020.

At present, Russian aspirations for the Russia-India-China strategic triangle has been made evident in Russia’s overt diplomatic declaration and related actions. Firstly, Russian Foreign Minister, Mr. Lavrov, warned at the 2023 Raisina Dialogue against ["outside players"](#) and underlined the primacy that Russia confers to the RIC. Secondly, Russia advocated for India's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, notably as a means of creating a second location for collaboration between the three countries and a place for problem-solving between China and India. Lavrov clearly asserted that Russia will stick to its policy of using multilateral forums such as BRICS and the SCO to solve problems between India and China. Russia increasingly looks at the Russia-India-China triangle as a balancing force

against Western dominance.

Weighing the current strength of the strategic triangle: RIC vs West

The importance of the RIC triangle has shot up [manifold](#) for Russia since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. Russia increasingly looks at the RIC triangle to pose a formidable challenge to the Western attacks on Russian aggression against Ukraine, which includes economic sanctions and an attempt to isolate Russia internationally. The United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan, and other nations have imposed over [16,500 sanctions](#) on Russia since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A significant target has concerned Russia's oil sector. India and China have both helped Russia out of this international isolation. First, India and China have both defied Western [sanctions](#) on Russian oil, and have emerged as the largest importers of Russian oil. Second, India and China continue to engage with Russia in multilateral forums. Moreover, Indian Foreign Minister, Mr. Jaishankar, visited Russia in January 2024 on a [diplomatic mission](#). The Russia-Ukraine war has much strengthened the RIC axis. Nonetheless, many challenges remain for the RIC strategic triangle.

First, the RIC fails to adhere to the Russian aspiration of an anti-west alignment. Following the strengthening of the RIC alignment after the Russia-Ukraine war, India – which claims to be a neutral player in international politics – has been criticized by the West. India claims that its denial to isolate Russia signifies a ‘[non-west](#)’ and not an ‘anti-west’ position. On the contrary, Russia-[China](#) collaboration is based on a symmetrical, anti-western geopolitical stance. On the other hand, China and India have now both emerged as great powers; this was not the case in the early 2000s when the RIC triangle was formed. The RIC triangle has now a much greater potential to influence international politics. The uninterrupted import of Russian oil and wider politico-economic collaboration between RIC countries in the face of Western sanctions is an expression of such potential. Although more a mix of ‘non-west’ and ‘anti-west’ rather than an exclusively anti-western triangle, the RIC triangle has proven to be an alternative power force in international politics.

Second, the India-China [rivalry](#) is a major challenge to the RIC triangle. India and China are two big powers in Asia who compete for influence in South Asia. Their

rivalry extends to the maritime sphere in the Indian Ocean as well. China constantly tries to outdo India's [‘Neighbourhood first policy’](#) by making inroads into India's neighboring countries with its Belt and Road initiative ([BRI](#)). China has made huge economic investments in India's neighboring countries – particularly Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives and Bangladesh. Importantly, as part of its [‘String of Pearls’](#) strategy, China has occupied the Gwadar port in Pakistan and the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, and it is now using Maldivian ports to dock its [research vessels](#). This may hamper India's maritime security. The current strengthening of the RIC triangle is due to unilateral proximity that both India and China share with Russia. India and Russia hold a long-term, [time-tested friendship](#), crystallized in the "special and privileged strategic partnership" between the two countries. During India's G20 presidency in 2023, India was able to get the West to agree to the [G20 Delhi Declaration](#) without condemning Russia for its military attack on Ukraine. At the same time, bilateral relations between China and Russia stand at an [all time high](#) since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war. In fact, CIA officials have dubbed Russia to be China's [‘junior partner’](#). China and India both hold strategic loyalties to Russia and have come forward to rescue Russia at a critical juncture of Western isolation. However, trouble arises for either India or China, it is highly unlikely they will help each other with the same vigour. Hence, the current alignment can be best described as an axis and not exactly a triangle.

Third, Russia and China [are](#) both “strategic competitors” of the US. On the other hand, [India and the US](#) are also strategic partners, and collaborate in the Indo-Pacific via forums such as QUAD to counter Chinese influence. While this is an extension of the challenges related to the India-China rivalry reflected on the RIC, it also influences the alignment between Russia and India, for Russia has a bitter geopolitical history with the US.

Fourth, the motivations of both China and India in RIC multilateral forums differ fundamentally from the Russian aspiration of building an overall strategic RIC convergence. For instance, when Russia proposed Indian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or [SCO](#), China counter proposed Indian rival Pakistan's [membership](#). Eventually, both India and China officially joined the SCO at [the 2017 SCO Summit in Kazakhstan](#). China does not sync up with the Russian

vision of RIC strategic convergence, or with the use of BRICS and SCO as forums of cooperation between China and India. On its side, India's aspiration behind multilateral engagements is guided by its aspiration to prevent exclusive Chinese domination of multilateral forums of the global South. The RIC rather provides India with a balancing arena to upkeep ties with its traditional partner Russia on the face of its growing friendship with China.

Conclusion

The RIC strategic triangle or other elaborate multilateral forums entailing the three powers boosts Eurasia and the Global South in the otherwise Western-dominated international fora. However, the geopolitical reality of the India-China rivalry, coupled with strategic differences between the three countries regarding the US, challenges the development of the RIC strategic triangle. Importantly, a major part of the RIC strategic convergence entails economic collaboration. Even, the current hardening of the RIC axis finds strong-ground in economic interests of the three nations. Military collaboration in the strategic RIC convergence is an impossibility given the current geo-political dynamics. Hence, the RIC trilateral meetings merely posit a symbolic gesture of strategic convergence rather than the true existence of the RIC strategic triangle.

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