



RUSSIA-INDIA-CHINA TRILATERAL MEETING: GENERATING A NEW POWER EQUATION?

By
Ume Farwa
Research Fellow/Sub-editor

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On December 11, New Delhi hosted the 15th Russia, India, and China (RIC) foreign ministerial level meeting. It was held against the backdrop of the recently resolved Doklam standoff and Russian concerns over the increasing Indo-US defence cooperation. Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing were expected to review the regional and global issues for chalking out a framework for trilateral exchanges and visits.¹ Yet, the outcomes remained more of an expression of intent, as well as bringing the differences between Indo-China and Indo-Russian relations into the open.

The RIC has its origin in the idea of “Primakov Triangle” which the Russian Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov presented before the Kremlin when the NATO forces started bombing a close ally of Russia, Serbia, in March 1999.² His idea of Russia-India-China troika was based on the premise that the three-pronged strategic pivot would facilitate multilateralism and eventually lead to create the suitable conditions for a multipolar world order. In 2002, the first official meeting of the RIC was convened, and since then its achievements have been less substantial. Viability of the RIC was further tested in its latest meeting but the divergence of interest among the three countries has emerged as an obstacle again. The fact that Russia and China’s top priority to balance the US is in

¹ “After Doklam, India, China and Russia to hold trilateral meeting, *Hindustan Times*, December 6, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/after-doklam-india-china-and-russia-to-hold-trilateral-meet/story-Ph4AttUVnH1rstwLAj5sUJ.html>

² Rakesh Simha, “Primakov: The Man Who Created Multipolarity”, *Russia Beyond*, June 27, 2015. https://www.rbth.com/blogs/2015/06/27/primakov_the_man_who_created_multipolarity_43919

marked contrast with India's strategic compulsion to counter China's rise is eroding the very base of the RIC.

It's true that America's decline is fast changing the geopolitical realities, leading major powers to generate new power equations. Held in this backdrop, the RIC trilateral meeting seems to be accelerating the pace of multilateralism, however, it is equally true that, under the pretext of 'multilateralism, the policy of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds hardly works.

This is what transpired in the RIC's lengthy statements and outcomes, which even on paper appear to be less converging. Particularly on the US-Japan-India-Australia Quad, India failed to placate its rival, China, and its estranged partner, Russia.

The RIC meeting in December was considered significant for many reasons. Firstly, it was the first high-level meeting between India and China, after the three-months long military standoff in Doklam, to further ease the tensions between the two countries. Secondly, following the India-US-Japan-Australia 'Quad' meeting discussed on the sidelines of the East-Asian Summit, New Delhi tried to dispel the impression that it is forming anti-China alliances. Thirdly, since recently Indo-US cooperation is on an ever-ascending graph, New Delhi tried to placate Moscow by holding this meeting.

However, the outcomes of the RIC meeting do not testify that the Indian efforts came to fruition.

In the 14th meeting of the RIC, held on April 18, 2016,³ India had signed on to a joint statement agreeing to China's views on South-China Sea disputes, which is missing this year.⁴ Last year, the three countries specifically assigned a specific portion of the communiqué to the South China Sea disputes, stating,

"Russia, India and China are committed to maintaining a legal order for the seas and the oceans based on the principles of international law, as reflected notably in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). All related disputes should be addressed through negotiations and agreements between the parties concerned. In this regard, the Ministers called for full respect of all

³ "Wang Yi Attends 14th China-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, April 19, 2016.

http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1357022.shtml

⁴ Ankit Panda, "What the Russia-India-China Meeting Means", *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/what-the-russia-india-china-trilateral-meeting-means/>

provisions of UNCLOS, as well as Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC.”⁵

In this statement, India agreed to China’s stance of not internationalizing the disputes and omitting this paragraph in the December 2017 communique suggests anything but the differing position of the two states. It hardly comes as a surprise because New Delhi is hailing the concept of ‘Indo-Pacific’ floated by the US. This concept entails freedom of navigation in the Asia-Pacific region, which undermines China’s stance on freedom of navigation in the South-China Sea.

A month before, in the East Asian Summit, the US, Japan, India and Australia agreed to create a group of ‘the four like-minded democracies’, named as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), to patrol and exert their influence from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean, including the disputed South China Sea. Earlier in 2007, the idea was suggested by Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, but dropped later on, when China objected that the partnership was aimed at stifling Beijing’s growth. Now that the idea of creating an alliance in the Pacific region has made a comeback, the unease and distrust between New Delhi and Beijing only grows wider. Therefore, in the RIC, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi warned India of ‘clique’ while making a reference to the US-Japan-India-Australia Quad.

Historically, India and Russia have enjoyed a long-term partnership but now, due to growing fondness between Washington and New Delhi, the old partners are drifting away from each other. At present, Russia and China have joined hands to challenge the unipolarity of the US, while a multi-polar world order seems to be in the offing. This development undermines Indian overtures against China’s growing economic and political clout in the region. Russia’s resurgence on international arena and its disagreements with India have helped it move closer to China and towards its closest ally, Pakistan. This reflected in Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement, suggesting New Delhi to join Belt and Road Initiative:

“I know India has problems, we discussed it today, with the concept of One Belt and One Road, but the specific problem in this regard should not make everything else conditional to resolving political issues.”⁶

⁵ Ankit Panda, “Russia-India-China Address South China Sea in Trilateral Statement”, *The Diplomat*, April 21, 2016.

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/russia-india-china-address-south-china-sea-in-trilateral-statement/>

⁶ “Russia urges India to line up behind China’s belt and road initiative”, *Hindustan Times*, December 11, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/russia-urges-india-to-line-up-behind-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative/story-5yajVbbgKOnAKZiHm6k2M.html>

This, again, is indicative of the fact that Russia and China are on one page, at least for now, as far as regional development plans are concerned. And also that New Delhi couldn't get the outcomes it expected. The impression of Indian multilateralism could not work, while Moscow and Beijing adhered to their common agenda. In this world, which is slipping into a transition, Indian act of balancing with the charm of multilateralism failed to generate the desired power equation.