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Russia-India-China Triangle – From Russian Perspective

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In Russian academic and official publications the idea of Russia-India-China strategic triangle is attributed to Yevgeny Primakov. In an interview on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the eminent scholar and statesman, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, that the moment Yevgeny Primakov took charge, the Russian Foreign Ministry heralded a fundamental turn in foreign policy. Sergey Lavrov expressed the opinion that in the near future historians will coin a special term to describe Primakov's role in politics. "They may call it the Primakov Doctrine," Lavrov said.

Some experts believe that it is natural to think about current RIC format as an integral and important part of the Primakov Doctrine. But to what extent can we say that the vision of Russia-India-China cooperation emerged in 1990s is still relevant today?

First of all, concept of the new triangle proposed by Mr. Primakov has never materialized into real diplomatic practice during his tenure in office. Secondly, we cannot trace any Russian doctrinal documents in 1990s with full description of the Russia-India-China triangle or implementation plan that take trilateral cooperation to a new level. And thirdly, Primakov's proposal was openly rejected by both Beijing and New Delhi.

The New Axis was seen by China and India as an anti-Western plan and a tool for counterbalancing the United States. Chinese officials repeatedly stressed the importance of the independent and non-bloc policy of the country. India was also sure that the strategic triangle could impose constraints on its foreign policy. It was the reason of rather cold response to Moscow's diplomatic initiative.

Still, we believe that the emergence of Primakov doctrine was an important sign of the changing quality of the Russian foreign policy decision-making. Mr. Primakov as an expert in oriental studies saw one of the Russia's priorities in strengthening ties with the Asian countries. As Ambassador Kirill Barskiy put it, "This "Eastern vector" was based upon the profound understanding of core national interests of Russia, the hard work of many generations of our diplomats and our wide experience. Nevertheless it still could be claimed that it was Mr. Yevgeny Primakov who drew up this vector in the mid-90s of the 20th century".

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Though initial idea of the triangle was not successful, we saw a steady progress in Russia's relations with Asian powers since 1990s. The idea of the Russia-China-India triangle triggered intensive and productive discussion in Russian expert community on the importance of Asian vector.

The second strong point of the Primakov doctrine is its focus on multilateral cooperation and multilateral institutions. Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS have common roots in 1990s and are closely related to the legacy of Yevgeny Primakov.

RIC as a 'diplomatic brand' was born when three foreign ministers held the first trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2003. To a certain extent it was motivated by the desire to find common ground in addressing terrorist threats in post-9/11 world. RIC foreign minister meetings have been held independently of other international events since 2005. During the 14th meeting held in Moscow in April, 2016 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pointed out that Russia-India-China (RIC) platform remains an effective and a sought-after format.

According to the Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), Russia believes that it is important to further develop the mechanism of effective and mutually beneficial foreign policy and day-to-day cooperation within the RIC format. Moscow considers the RIC dialogue mechanism an important element of multilateral net diplomacy, working in the interests of establishing of a fair world order. Official statements also emphasize RIC's role in formation of overwhelming, equal and indivisible security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region and its inclusive sustainable economic development.

Nevertheless, Russian official discourse usually regards RIC as a 'trilateral dialogue mechanism', not as a strategic triangle. RIC meeting's procedure is flexible enough to allow room for the discussion of the broad range of international problems. Low level of institutionalization, from the other hand, does not allow RIC to act in a more concentrated and effective manner.

In comparison with other multilateral platforms RIC has significantly low level of administrative support in Russian foreign policy apparatus. For example, Russian participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is coordinated by the Special Representative of the President (Ambassadorial rank). Second track diplomacy in BRICS format is greatly supported by the Russian National Committee on BRICS Research. RIC remains a kind of diplomatic discussion club and its contribution to the trilateral economic or cultural cooperation is very limited.

After the imposition of Western sanctions there are renewed discussions among some Russian experts about forming anti-Western coalitions (especially with China). Some experts believe that Russia and China are moving ever faster towards a formal military and political alliance (and this is what guarantees a worthy place for the two countries on the world stage). Others, on the contrary, are certain that a partnership can soon crack because of growing asymmetry (a weakening Russia and China that is increasing its power). According to some experts, Russia, India and China can unite on a special civilizational basis the entire "non-Western world".

Though India objected to the West imposing sanctions against Russia, New Delhi had strong interest in economic partnership with the West and its own security agenda with the United States. At the same time, the Chinese side objects to the term "friendly neutrality" proposed by some Russian researchers, which assumes a neutral (but de facto approving) position in those areas where opportunities for open support are absent. In official Chinese statements, the position on Ukraine and the Crimea is called "just and fair", so, relations with Russia are included by China in a broader context, and, it cannot be spoken on neutrality, i.e., the unchanging position that does not depend on Russia's specific actions.

“Russia should not exaggerate the degree to which China shares its interests and interpret its silence as a sign of agreement,” as noted in the analytical report prepared by Larisa Smirnova, an expert of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). “In spite of some differences with the West, China has strong economic ties with the United States and Europe. Politically, China’s attitude is pragmatic, as it seeks to maintain cooperative relations both with the West and with Russia. Therefore, in order to preserve and maintain profound relations with China, Russia should avoid situations in which China would be forced to publicly take sides between Russia and the West,” reads the RIAC document issued in 2014. The same argument can be made about Russia-India side of the triangle. To be successful Russia-China-India trilateral cooperation should not emphasize the counterbalancing the West.

Under the conditions of Western sanctions, Moscow naturally seeks to find a new support in the East. However, the eastern or Asian vector of Russian foreign policy should not be reduced solely to the Chinese direction (although, China is without a doubt the main Russia’s partner in Asia). It is important to develop cooperation not only with China, but also with other regional players – on bilateral and multilateral basis. RIC can play its special role in strengthening Russia’s relations with two important Asian players - China and India.