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Russia-India-China: The Never-Never Triangle

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Russia, India and China have attempted twice to form a strategic triangle, without much success. In the 1950s, these three countries sought to counter Western influence and power by moving closer; Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru leaned closer towards the Soviet bloc and simultaneously attempted to craft a post-colonial Asian-African that would be independent of the Soviet-led socialist world. This was based on the assumption of closer ties with post-colonial states of the third world, particularly China. In the post-Cold war period, once again the three powers attempted to build an alignment in the hope of building a multipolar world. Neither effort succeeded.

Both times, these efforts were motivated partially by balance of power considerations for at least two of the three (Russia and China) and an illogical anti-Americanism for India. There was little balance of power logic to India joining such an alignment, especially aligning with China. While it is possible to see some sort of balance of power consideration for India to align itself with Moscow, it made little sense for India to align with China from such a perspective because China was a powerful neighbor and thus a potential threat. On the other hand, for China and Russia, there was some logic to aligning with each other because both in the 1950s and in the post-Cold War period, their primary security consideration was the much more powerful United States. Therefore, though Russia and China were also neighbors and hence potentially a threat to each other, the presence of an even stronger adversary that threatened them both allowed them to come together to balance this more powerful adversary. By the 1960s, however, the Soviet Union and China saw each other as a bigger threat than the United States. In response, the Soviet Union attempted to balance against China by moving closer to India and Vietnam. China responded by aligning itself with the United States against the Soviet Union and with Pakistan against India. Until the end of the Cold War, this alignment pattern persisted: Moscow and New Delhi against Beijing, while Beijing aligned with Washington and Islamabad. After the Cold War, as bipolarity gave way to an American dominated unipolar order, Russia and China increasingly felt threatened by the new international order, and in response, they came closer with India too joining them. But the balance of power can only be ignored for so long: eventually, in both cases, it reasserted itself. But the balance of power by itself is insufficient to explain

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this because the structure of the balance of power has to be mediated through the perception of decision-makers. Thus, in both periods, perceptions of threat did not entirely follow the relative power balance. In the 1960s, the US was much more powerful than either the Soviet Union or China. But for both Moscow and Beijing, their ideological clash for the leadership of the global communist movement ensured that they saw each other as much of a threat as the United States. This was even more visible in the case of India. Though India did not face any direct threat from the US, India's left-of-center domestic political ideology led India into an anti-American embrace with Moscow and Beijing. This was much more visible in the 1950s; in the 2000s, India's embrace of the Moscow-Beijing coalition took place even as India was increasingly aligning itself with Washington. Two factors motivated this: one was a genuine desire, even as India moved closer to Washington, to ensure a modicum of freedom of action from Washington, especially because it appeared as if India could play the same Cold War game of aligning with neither side to garner benefits from both. A second reason was related to Indian domestic politics, where the government in power felt the need to develop closer ties with all powers in order to demonstrate that Indian policy was independent, despite moving closer to the United States.

The first section of this discussion paper considers the Soviet-China-India axis in the 1950s and the reasons for its eventual collapse. The second section considers the post-Cold War return of this same axis, its slow deterioration and its future prospects.

The First Edition: The Soviet-China-India Axis in the 1950s

Though this was not a formal partnership, the 1950s did see India, the Soviet Union and China developing fairly close relationship, mainly in opposition to the US and the Western coalition. But these were bilateral relationships rather than a trilateral partnership. The motivations of each of these states was different. The Soviet Union and China were communist ideological allies, of course, though there was considerable suspicion between the leaderships of the two countries and ideology by itself would eventually prove to be a rather brittle basis for strategic partnership. On the other hand, for the Soviet Union, locked in a bipolar global competition with a much more powerful United States, building alliances with as many newly independent but non-socialist developing countries was a strategic requirement. Though Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was much more interested in fostering communist rebellions in these states, including in India, his successors realized that they had a lot more to gain by developing ties with the established governments in these countries. This was ideologically difficult to justify, but perfectly pragmatic. The communist movements in many of these countries were weak, and there was little chance that

they would succeed in seizing power. On the other hand, though the governments in these countries were fiercely anti-communist in their domestic politics, they were also anti-Western in their foreign policy orientation, and looked to Moscow not just for political support but even for economic assistance and technology. This provided an opportunity for Nikita Khruschev and the Soviet leadership, which they seized to build closer ties with countries like India.

For China, facing off in a violent confrontation with the US in Korea, closer ties with a sympathetic Nehru was useful. Still, even in the mid-1950s, much before the Sino-Indian border crisis began to boil, China began to cultivate Pakistan as a potential counterbalance to India in South Asia. Though Pakistan was part of anti-communist alliances such as the CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) and SEATO (South-East Asian Treaty Organization) that were designed to counter China, Pakistan's leadership made it clear to China that their objective was to balance India, not China.

The Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's worldview saw a third force in world politics, outside of the two bipolar powers, made up of newly independent Asian and African states that would both stay out of the deadly Cold War but would also attempt to reduce the tensions between the superpowers. China, in particular, was seen as an important component of this strategy. Thus, Nehru tried hard to build closer ties with China, for example by acceding quite early, and without any quid pro quo, to Chinese seizure of Tibet. Tibet had been a neutral buffer between the British and Chinese empires during the colonial era, and some leaders in Nehru's cabinet thought that India should continue with that arrangement. It is quite possible that independent India did not have the material capacity to protect Tibet from China, but this was moot because Nehru was uninterested in any such proposal. In addition, Nehru worked assiduously to promote China's normalization, ensuring that China was invited to the Geneva and Bandung conferences. Nehru foolishness was not shared by China, of course, and they continued to be wary of India.

Similarly, the Soviet Union represented an alternative source of support for Nehru. Nehru adopted autarchic economic policies that were modelled on Soviet five-year plans, and in international politics, rejected US efforts to integrate India into the global anti-communist crusade. Though theoretically neutral between the two sides, India consistently took the Soviet side in various contemporary Cold War disputes.

But these drivers of common interests did not last for long, for any of the three powers. The most surprising split was not so much between China and India, but between ideological brethren, China and the Soviet Union. This was never an easy relationship, but quarrels over the leadership of the international communist movement, Mao's suspicions about Soviet efforts to find a modus vivendi with the

US, and Moscow increasing closeness to Delhi were all reasons for suspicion. On the Soviet side, there was increasing dismay of Mao's recklessness, and his constant effort to provoke the US. Mao's dismissive statements about nuclear war scared the Soviets sufficiently as to make them stop nuclear cooperation with China, and their subsequent support to India in the Sino-Indian border dispute was an important factor in the Sino-Soviet split. The Sino-Indian break-up, on the other hand, owed much to the incompatible objectives of the two sides: Mao saw Nehru as a potential competitor for influence in Asia and the third world, and was convinced, despite little evidence, that India was interfering in Tibet. Nehru's repeated efforts to convince Mao failed to overcome Chinese suspicions. Ultimately, the mutual fear of two rising powers were difficult to overcome despite ideational commitment, at least in New Delhi. On the other hand, the Indo-Soviet bilateral ties became stronger and remained solid through the rest of the Cold War, and paradoxically, concern about China actually cemented Indo-Soviet ties. Thus at the root of the break of this Soviet-Chinese-Indian quasi-alignment lay balance of power consideration of three large, powerful countries, two of whom neighbored the third. Not surprisingly, China, which was neighbor to both the Soviet Union and India, ultimately broke with both, while the other two came together out of concern about China.

RIC: The Second Edition

With the end of the Cold War and the increasing pressure of US unipolarity, the three countries once again began to work together. This time, unlike in the 1950s, it was self-consciously trilateral which eventually led to the RIC (Russia-India-China) grouping. But the end of the Cold War did not improve the prospects of this trilateral very much, and the only real success here was that this unlikely trio managed to keep the pretense of a trilateral formation alive for two decades. In all probability, as in the 1950s, this trilateral will eventually devolve into bilaterals, though this time it is likely that it would result in two bilateral – Russia-India and Russia-China – instead of just one.

This outcome, especially the emergence of the Russia-China alignment, needs explanation. A pure balance of power perspective would have suggested that as Chinese power grew, it would impact on both India and Russia, and thus to a similar outcome as in the 1950s, leading to just a Russia-India bilateral. That this did not happen is the singular consequence of Western pressures on Moscow. Russia worries as much about Chinese power as India and other neighbors of China. But American and Western pressure on Russia meant that Russia feared Western intervention even more than it feared Chinese power. Thus, though the consequences of China's rise did

lead to similar imperatives in both Moscow and New Delhi, their responses were somewhat different. But, as in the 1950s, the primary reason for the devolution will be the pressure of balance of power politics, in particular the competition between India and China.

The emergence of the unipolar order after the Cold War scrambled international politics, pressuring all states into fundamentally re-evaluating their strategic choices. For all states, having positive relations with the United States became a critical imperative. This was no less so for Russia, India and China. Though all three hoped a multipolar order would eventually emerge that would include them also as polar powers, they recognized that until that was realized they needed to maintain good relations with the United States. In addition, American power could also be potentially beneficial to these countries. The American economy was the world's largest and it dominated international multilateral institutions. Thus, instead of balancing the United States, as many analysts had feared would happen, international politics witnessed significant efforts by all secondary powers to bandwagon with the United States. This was no different for Russia, China and India. So, despite hopes of the trilateral, all three focused more on building better ties with the United States than on building the trilateral. Though traditionally good Russian-Indian relations continued (by and large), Washington emerged as the main consideration in the foreign policies of both Moscow and New Delhi. For China, which aligned with the United States in the latter half of the Cold War, this was less of an issue. But seeking good ties with Washington was unfamiliar terrain for Moscow and New Delhi, though this did not prove to be much of a hindrance.

But as Chinese power increased dramatically since the beginning of the century, and as American weariness with its global role grew – accentuated by two seemingly endless wars in the Middle East and South Asia – the global balance of power shifted, giving China somewhat greater role in the international order. But this greater power also had other inevitable balance of power consequences. For one, increasing Chinese power has led to greater concern about Chinese power in Washington. Even as recently as the first Obama administration, the United States hoped to build a cooperative order with a Chinese-American condominium. But even former Obama administration officials now admit they were hopelessly naïve in their approach. Equally, China's growing power has led to concerns among most of its neighbors, including Japan, India, Australia and Vietnam. This concern grew with China's increasingly aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. The consequence has been both a growing alignment between India and the United States, as well as between India and the various powers of the Indo-Pacific. India has only traditionally had cool and distant ties with members of the US alliance structure in the region such as Japan

and Australia. But the pressure of China's growing power has brought all these countries together in a regional alignment, with Washington proving to be the anchor.

The consequence is that the Russia-India-China trilateral is on its last legs. It was in any case not particularly effective. Russia and China were concerned primarily about American power, while Indian objectives were mostly to generate some common positions regarding international terrorism, by which India meant terrorism emanating from Pakistan, with support from Pakistan's Army. Typically, in the search for common positions, the concerns of all were addressed, but watered down so much that it did not really satisfy any of the three powers.

But even such nominal agreement may not last for very long, especially because of differences between India and China. China's open opposition to India's application for membership of the NSG did substantial damage to Sino-India relations. What New Delhi found particularly galling was that India's NSG membership did not really or directly affect Chinese interests in any way. Moreover, the Indian political leadership had made direct high-level appeal to Chinese leadership on the issue and was confident that China would not so openly oppose Indian membership. Thus, China's decision to stand alone against India was seen as a clear indication of hostility to India. Subsequently, China's decision to build the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, which India claims as Indian territory, was seen by India as further indication of Chinese lack of consideration of Indian sensitivities, leading to India boycotting the Belt-and-Road summit in Beijing. More recently, of course, the confrontation in Doklam has further badly damaged the relationship, especially the steady stream of invective from both official spokespersons and official Chinese media. Add to this India's continuing suspicions of the China-Pakistan axis and Chinese efforts to woo India's smaller neighbors, as well as Beijing's concerns about India's growing closeness to the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific add up to a rather unhappy picture as far as the RIC is concerned. Briefly, then, any hope of an Indian-Chinese partnership, even in the RIC trilateral or other multilateral set-ups like BRICS is more or less dead, even if these organizations formally continue to limp along.

But the part of the trilateral, the Sino-Russian one, is likely to grow stronger. Russia has made common cause with China in their opposition to the United States and the West. Moscow sees little choice, understandably. But one of the key puzzles of the dying Russia-China-India axis is what will happen to the Russia-India bilateral alignment. There is genuine strategic affection towards each other in both capitals, and great public support for the alignment, definitely in India. But the growing tension between India and China does put Moscow in a tight spot and its position will only get squeezed further in the coming years. Until now, Russia had avoided taking

direct sides in the competition, hoping it would simply go away. But, it will not. The question then for Moscow is how long it can continue the high-wire balancing act between China and India. Though it is unlikely that India will make Russia choose one side or the other, it is likely that China will. But even here, there are a couple of caveats. Until now, Russia has supported India, even when China opposed Indian objectives. For example, despite China opposing India's membership of the Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG), Russia supported Indian membership. Should the requirement of closer ties with China, or even dissatisfaction with India's closer ties with US make Russia change its diplomatic support to India, this will seriously dent the Russia-India bilateral alignment. Similarly, Russia has been getting closer to Pakistan, including conducting joint military exercises. If Russia continues to get closer to Pakistan, this would also affect Russia-India ties. Indeed, for cultural and psychological reasons, New Delhi can be expected to be more sensitive to closer Russian-Pakistani ties than Russian-Chinese relations. On the other hand, India's increasing closeness to Washington means that New Delhi is aligning with the power that is putting pressure on Moscow. Whatever Russia's long-term concerns about a resurgent China, it is unlikely that Moscow has much of a choice but to depend on China's diplomatic support for the time being.

Conclusion

The new Russia-India-China trilateral has survived for two decades, even if it was not particularly effective in countering American power or in "creating" a multipolar world. But its fate will be determined by the same balance of power forces that determined the fate of the last Russia-India-China trilateral in the 1950s. One key distinction between the two trilaterals is that in the first edition, it was the Soviet Union that was the most powerful corner of the trilateral. Today, Russia is the weakest of the three. This makes Russia much more vulnerable, and Western hostility to Moscow make Russia much more dependent on Chinese support. But other than this distinction, the fate of the second edition of the trilateral will not be very different. Sino-Indian competition and their proximity makes them natural adversaries, and neither ideology nor wishful thinking can change this dynamic. The only possibility that could bring these two together is the same force that brings Russia and China together – a common threat. But there is little prospect of that. And so, this edition of this trilateral will fare no better than the last one.