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High Rhetorical Significance, Low Practical Substance: Do We Need the RIC Format?

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Russia, China and India are amongst the world's largest continental-sized entities and civilizational states. Together they constitute roughly 40 percent of the world's total population, 22 percent of the total global landmass, and 18 percent of the global economy. Given their sheer size and their power status in both regional and global affairs, the relationship among the three countries has direct bearing on the basic principles of Asian security and economic and social development for both Asia, and increasingly the broadly defined Eurasia. In addition to their role as key stakeholders of maintaining Asian regional security, the three countries also serve as major participants in the political movement for reforming the current international system. It is in this sense that some Chinese experts compare the trilateral relations among these three countries to the so-called "big" trilateral relations of the US-Soviet Union-China during the Cold War era, and even envisage the RIC format as a replication of this "big" trilateral format.

Russia, India and China (RIC) have been interacting in an official trilateral format since 1996. RIC as possible axis formation is an important political idea in the post-Cold War period, advocated by the Russian leaders in the middle 1990s, especially by the then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov in 1996, hence the idea of "Primakov's Triangle" in the Russian media. The official trilateral format was later further envisaged by the Russian side against the backdrop of the Kosovo war and the 1998 financial crisis, possibly as a trilateral Moscow-Beijing-Delhi axis to counterbalance the U.S. hegemonic power. Since then, the most visible regular trilateral mechanism is the RIC foreign ministers annual meeting: the first such "troika meeting" was held in Moscow in September 2001. Since then, the ministers of foreign affairs of RIC countries have met fourteen times, and issued eight joint statements. Alongside with such meetings at the ministerial level, meetings of the trilateral group of experts in policy fields of more technical nature (such as health and medicine) have also been established. Building on their high rate of economic growth since the early 2000s, the three countries have identified energy, infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, and IT as the focus areas in trilateral economic cooperation. The financial crisis of 2008 and decline of western economies opened up new space for

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imagining and constructing alternative mechanisms of global governance. As various alternative mechanisms gained institutional momentum, all three of RIC countries have been present and playing active roles in several key regional/international/global platforms/organizations: most notably Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building) in parallel to the BRICs and G20.

What originally underlain the trilateral format was the common dissatisfaction with the U.S. dominated unipolar world order and common interest in advocating and promoting a more democratic, multi-polar world. In this regard, the fact that the three countries are so different makes possible close collaboration even more valuable, as such trilateral cooperation may provide the theoretical foundation and a functional model of *non-ideological* democratic forces in the international system. For example, in the recent trilateral meeting of ministers of foreign affairs in April 2016, the three parties agree to “establish open, inclusive, indivisible, and transparent regional security and collaboration framework, based on widely recognized international laws and rules.” It was also announced that RIC would start the first trilateral negotiation on Asia-pacific affairs. All of the three countries express interests in providing a new *continental* pivot for managing and alleviating increasing pressure in regional maritime security. In principle, the trilateral format can also help strengthening and further promoting the kind of approaches of collaboration based on the following principles. First, such an approach builds and promotes political cooperation through economic cooperation. Second, such an approach aims at promoting trilateral cooperation through bilateral cooperation, all under the guidance of the non-alignment principle.

If the three countries could effectively implement and push forward the trilateral format envisaged as such, they are in the position of providing collective voice as the non-western, rising powers in reforming global governance, and promoting and popularizing possible Asian/Eurasian practices in security management for a larger world audience. Last but not least, for China, working with Russia and India, two of its largest neighboring countries is of immense importance for ensuring a safe and stable “neighboring” (*zhoubian*) environment.

Despite the fact the official trilateral format has taken shape, the RIC “troika” is still at a nascent stage. In terms of both the development of trilateral mechanisms and the promotion of concrete collaboration projects, the progress of RIC mechanism is slow and very cautionary. So far, the trilateral format still exclusively focuses on political level and lacks substance and depth in economic and cultural collaboration. The longevity and effectiveness of the trilateral format is subject to both lacks of mutual trust on the macro- and micro-levels and conflicting priorities and interests

under significant strategic uncertainties. That's the main reason that the formal troika mechanism has long been stagnant at the ministerial level. Overall, it leaves a lot to be desired in bringing to life its potential symbolic significance.

The most important development of the trilateral relations has been primarily externally driven. Beyond rhetoric, all three of them still treat the US as the primary bench mark, the main external reference point for their respective foreign policies to judge their relative positions in the international system, including their relative relations within the trilateral format. Such international primacy of the US implies that any future progress of the RIC format will likely be derived from each country's relative position via-s-via the US and the U.S. led international system.

Among the three countries, all three pairs of bilateral relations are characterized by high degrees of asymmetry on two different levels. On the level of bilateral relations, for example, Russia is more concerned with strategic and political consequences of possible RIC format while China has more stakes in economic cooperation. On the level of three pairs of bilateral relations (the three sides of the possible RIC triangle), the China-India side obviously is weaker than the other two sides. Although these pairs of asymmetry are of different nature, they all hinder the realization of the significance of the trilateral format.

As to each country's overall attitude towards the current international system, they also express different preferences and approaches, especially when it comes to defining what an ideal and functioning alternative order is and how to approach and construct this alternative. Russia behaves in the most radical manner, especially in the security sphere, demonstrating intentions of "overturning" at least a part of the current dominant systems. Russia perceives RIC format primarily from a geopolitical perspective, highlighting more of its potential counter-balance effects. While both China and India have been acting more as a soft reformer, China recently has demonstrated increasing interest and determination to establish a set of "parallel structures" versus the institutions established under the US leadership since the WWII and/or the Cold War. These China-initiated and/or China-sponsored institutions are not meant to directly replace the existing dominant ones, but at least show potential to "route around" the existing ones so that in the long run the existing institutions will become increasingly irrelevant over time. In contrast, overall India has been the least enthusiastic one among the three in the framing of RIC format as counterbalance against the west, appearing more reserved in pushing forward the trilateral format. Whenever US's attitude towards either China or Russia changes, India tends to back down from its current position regarding RIC format too. With India's recent unprecedented strategic rapprochement with the US, India has moved more towards U.S. and U.S. led institutions. It is very likely that India is departing from the non-

alignment principle more towards de facto association with the US, especially as a response to the growing power of China. Amid the recent tension in disputed border region, the refusal of China to join a Russia-initiated three party defense ministers conference in Moscow in 2016 is another sign of the difficulty in synchronize the differing interests and orientation among the three countries, under rapidly shifting global and regional security situation.

Thus, so far genuine progress in the trilateral format as well as its impact on the region is minimal, if any. The most visible and effective interaction is either through three pairs of bilateral mechanisms or through participation in other regional or multilateral mechanism (BRICs is probably the most prominent example recently). The trilateral format has not demonstrated potential to either replace or impose its own independent agenda on any of the three bilateral relationships. The idea of trilateral cooperation will need a greater push before it is going to come up on the radar of policy-makers in all three countries and other countries concerned.

Some specific policy fields definitely hold the potential for further development. For example, the trilateral format can seriously explore the possibility of a trilateral cooperative framework where Russia serves as the main energy provider, China as the transit country, and India as the energy importing country. In anticipation of the boom in infrastructural construction across Asia and Eurasia, the three countries should also experiment and enlarge various approaches of cross-investment and cross-shareholding in infrastructural construction. China, while further promoting the Belt & Road Initiative, should understand BRI's security implication and not portray BRI as the umbrella initiative that all other external policy initiatives are supposed to converge so as to downplay the concerns it may cause to other countries, including Russia and India. Since all three countries are multi-national, multi-ethnic large nation, there is also ample room and urgent need for them to exchange their experiences in handling ethnic/nationality problems. Through related mechanisms, they can achieve more in cooperating in opposing terrorism and extremism. Given that Afghanistan-South Asia-Central Asia as a strategic crossroad is of common concern for all three, this region can serve as a break-through of coordination in regional security and stability building, complementing other multilateral mechanisms. Overall, security seems to be the best candidate to serve as the key area of trilateral cooperation.

Ultimately, in an ideal scenario, a successful and effective RIC trilateral format is supposed to provide high-level public goods for inclusive and sustainable Asian, and increasingly, Eurasian security, based on three continental powers, which will deviate from an anti-west axis. However, all these possible fields of cooperation and public goods provision beg the question: do we really need RIC trilateral format for these

functions? Or is the RIC format really necessary or indispensable? Two fundamental dilemmas or challenges stand out in hampering the smooth progress in the trilateral format. The first is: how one can perceive and promote a genuinely “non-ideological” format when the three parties’ fundamental interests in coming together were originally derived from the intention of counter-balancing the US. The second challenge is how to keep the trilateral format’s relevance when all three of them are now present and actively interacting in a whole set of, often overlapping, multilateral regional and global mechanisms, for example, among others, G20 and BRICS. These mechanisms so far usually uphold a much richer agenda than the RIC format. Especially after India joins the SCO, in which the three countries can discuss the military and anti-terrorism cooperation and regional security, the issue of relevance becomes even more challenging for the RIC format.