

# New Order for Old Triangles? The Russia-China-India Matrix



**Bobo LO**

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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

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# Abstract

As the US-led international system struggles under the strain of multiple challenges, the complex web of relations between Russia, China, and India will be critical to the formation of a new world order. Yet the influence these great powers exert, on themselves and others, is uneven and difficult to predict. Alongside a public consensus on a “democratic world order”, there are significant differences of perspective and sometimes conflicting interests. It is far from clear whether the Russia-China-India matrix can form the basis of an emerging network of cooperation, or whether its contradictions foreshadow an increasingly problematic engagement.

Much will depend on how Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi manage the growing asymmetries in their individual relationships. Another challenge will be to reconcile contrasting visions of global governance in a post-unipolar world, and develop new structures for a more equitable and effective system. The size of the task is accentuated against the backdrop of growing foreign policy ambitions in all three capitals and the resurgence of traditional geopolitics.

The future of the Russia-China-India matrix will also be shaped by developments elsewhere, in particular the changed landscape of US foreign policy under Donald Trump, and continuing uncertainties over the course of US-China relations. There is potential for limited trilateral cooperation, as Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi look to hedge against a fluid international environment. But bilateralism—at once more familiar and tangible—is likely to remain the preferred mode of engagement.

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# Introduction

At a time when the US-led international system is creaking under the strain of multiple challenges and internal frictions, debate has turned to what might emerge in its place. There is much talk about a new multipolar order or polycentric system,<sup>1</sup> and of a “post-American world” and “great convergence” in which the United States remains a leading player, but where power and influence are much more diffuse.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, it may be that no definable system materializes, but we are left instead with a “new world disorder” characterized by fluidity, ambiguity, and considerable uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

All this is still to play for. What is clear, though, is that relations between Russia, China, and India are likely to have a major impact on whatever ensues. We are witnessing the beginnings of a post-American matrix, in which interaction between these three countries—sometimes cooperative, sometimes competitive—is exerting a growing influence not just on each other, but also the broader international system.

The question I want to address in this essay is the *extent and nature of this influence*. It is all too easy to lapse into clichés—about the “inevitable” decline of the West, the inexorable rise of China, and the “shift of global power to the East”. Today, China and India are the two fastest growing powers in the world, and yet their impact on international governance is far from clear. Russia and China are said to represent an “authoritarian entente”, but even if this were true it would be foolish to assume that they see the world in similar ways and that their interests naturally converge. Reality is far more complex than such over-simplifications would allow. The influence that Russia, China, and India exert is uneven and often hard to pin down. Their various interactions—bilateral, trilateral, and in

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1. See, for example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s speech at the 71<sup>st</sup> session of the UN General Assembly, 23 September 2016, <http://russiaun.ru>.

2. F. Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, Norton, 2009; K. Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, The West, and the Logic of One World*, Public Affairs, 2013.

3. B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Brookings and Chatham House, 2015. The American Sovietologist Ken Jowitt originally coined the term “new world disorder” to describe the more fluid and uncertain international environment after the end of the Cold War—*New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction*, University of California, 1992.

multilateral structures—offer a fluid and contradictory picture. Alongside a public consensus on a “democratic world order”, there are critical differences of perspective, sometimes conflicting priorities and interests, and significant strategic uncertainties.

## Structure

This essay is in five parts. Part I looks at the historical and conceptual background to the dynamics between Russia, China, and India. There are several traditions or inspirations at play here. The most salient is classical great power balancing, both amongst themselves and in relation to outside players, the United States in the first instance. The Putin regime has sought to revive Yevgeny Primakov’s original vision of a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis to counterbalance Washington’s “hegemonic” power. At the same time, there are more “modern”—and less overtly competitive—interpretations of trilateralism, where the rationale is essentially positive: to cooperate in promoting more effective and equitable governance. Then there are hybrid variants, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) framework, where themes of geopolitics, governance, and development are intertwined.<sup>4</sup>

The second part of the essay focuses on the three bilateral relationships that make up the Russia-China-India matrix. Despite their very different character and weight, they have at least one notable feature in common: they are all defined by asymmetry. This has been well-documented in the case of the Sino-Russian partnership,<sup>5</sup> but it also characterizes the interaction between China and India, and Russia and India. The big question is whether these relationships, unequal as they are, nevertheless form the basis of an emerging network of cooperation, or whether their contradictions foreshadow an increasingly fractious engagement.

Part III examines the diverse structures of Russia-China-India cooperation, such as the foreign ministers’ “troika”, and various formal and informal arrangements, in particular the BRICS framework. It considers whether these institutions offer a plausible basis for a reformed model of global governance, or whether their function is rather more modest: to mediate or neutralize bilateral disagreements and tensions behind the façade of a public likemindedness.

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4. See B. Lo, “The Illusion of Convergence—Russia, China, and the BRICS”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 92, March 2016, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

5. A. Gabuev, “Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis”, Carnegie Moscow Center Report, June 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

Part IV identifies several overarching themes in Russia-China-India relations. Of particular importance here are a new or renewed globalism in their respective foreign policies; issues of strategic trust and mistrust; instrumentalist considerations; the compartmentalization of political, economic, and security interests; and the role of outside players.

Finally, the essay considers how the matrix might evolve over the next 5-10 years. It is tempting to come up with “momentous” scenarios—either a great non-American (or even anti-American) convergence between Russia, China, and India, or the irresistible build-up of strategic tensions and confrontation between them. But what eventually transpires may turn out to be a version of the present, a mix of cooperation and competition that turns out to be surprisingly stable.



# Historical and Conceptual Background

The idea of a Russia-China-India triangle is of relatively recent provenance. Although all three countries have never belonged to what might loosely be called the “Western camp”, neither have they offered an alternative consensus to the West. China and India participated in the 1955 Bandung Conference that led eventually to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), but their relationship broke down following China’s invasion of parts of northern India in a brief border conflict in 1962. The Soviet Union and China were involved in the so-called “unbreakable friendship” during the 1950s, but by 1960 this had unraveled, giving way to three decades of strategic confrontation and occasionally armed hostility. And the Soviet-Indian relationship, although positive in significant respects, was never an alliance even at its height, and diminished rapidly in importance following the collapse of the USSR.

Against this unpromising background, Yevgeny Primakov, then Russian prime minister, broached the idea of a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis during a visit to India in December 1998. Primakov was unequivocal about his intentions—to build a new consensus to counterbalance the hegemonic power, and unilateralist inclinations, of the United States. The Sino-Russian “strategic partnership” was already moving in that direction, but Primakov thought it important to enlist India in this enterprise—partly because of its growing strategic weight, but mainly because it would broaden the normative and political appeal of multipolarity, thereby lending it greater legitimacy.

Unfortunately for Primakov and other advocates of a post-American multipolar order, New Delhi gave the idea short shrift. One reason for the negative Indian reaction was the presence of continuing tensions with Beijing over the border issue and China’s direct support for Pakistan in the disputed region of Kashmir. Another factor was an aversion to becoming embroiled in geopolitical games. New Delhi was concerned that India could become hostage to an overtly anti-American agenda, and be deflected from its traditionally non-aligned path. Although tensions with Washington

were high following America's condemnation of Indian nuclear testing earlier that year, there was no desire to adopt such a committal course.<sup>6</sup>

Following this reverse, the Primakov idea lapsed into hibernation. The Yeltsin administration moved to other priorities, such as tightening bilateral ties with Beijing. And after Putin came to power, the Kremlin focused on mending relations with the West—a move given added impetus following the events of 11 September 2001. Even after the Orange Revolution, and Putin's condemnation of the United States at the 2007 Munich Security Conference,<sup>7</sup> Moscow's outlook remained overwhelmingly Westerncentric. India scarcely featured in Russian strategic thinking, and ideas of a Russia-China-India triangle appeared defunct, notwithstanding the formal existence of the RIC foreign ministers' troika since September 2001.

## New catalysts

In recent years, however, several developments have combined to revive notions of triangularism and trilateralism. The most influential was the global financial crisis of 2008 and the prolonged downturn in many Western economies. Virtually overnight, this challenged the legitimacy of the US-led order, and opened up space for serious consideration of alternative mechanisms of global governance. The idea that Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi might cooperate on larger international issues became both more plausible and necessary. It is no coincidence that the BRICS framework started to gain institutional momentum around this time.

Another critical development was the anti-Putin protest movement in late 2011-early 2012. This shocked the Kremlin out of its complacency, and pushed it in a much more actively anti-Western direction. The United States was accused of attempting to engineer regime change in Russia, and Putin reacted by giving renewed emphasis to Russia's relations with Asia. In a widely publicized article in February 2012, he highlighted the global role of China and India, and the importance of the Asia-Pacific region in general.<sup>8</sup> Although much of Moscow's "turn to the East" proved to be rhetorical, Russia-China-India strategic cooperation was once again back on the Kremlin's agenda.

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6. See H. Pant, "The Moscow-Beijing-Delhi Strategic Triangle: An Idea Whose Time May Never Come", *Crossroads*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2005, pp. 19-46.

7. "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy", 12 February 2007, [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

8. V. Putin, "Russia and the Changing World", *Moskovskie novosti*, 27 February 2012, [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com).

Moscow's annexation of Crimea, its military intervention in southeast Ukraine, and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia have acted as further catalysts. In contrast to previous occasions, Europe became bracketed with the United States as part of a larger, hostile West. And the East, principally China and India, became extolled as a counterbalance to the West in all its dimensions—political, economic, strategic, and normative.

Of course, what the Kremlin wants and what it gets are two different things. It seeks Chinese and Indian support in Russia's struggle with the West, but many of the difficulties that Primakov encountered in 1998 remain, namely, a lack of enthusiasm in New Delhi, and strategic caution in Beijing. In these circumstances, the main conceptual challenge for Moscow is to reconcile (or at least mask) the contradictions between an overtly geopolitical goal—counterbalancing the United States—with an agenda that purports to work for better global governance. The issue is of critical importance, not just for reasons of international legitimacy, but also on a practical level amongst the partners themselves. An excessive emphasis on geopolitical balancing and countering US interests, and Russia-China-India cooperation becomes unattractive to New Delhi, while also engendering concerns in Beijing. However, if the geopolitical purpose is removed altogether, then trilateralism loses much of its value for Moscow. As we shall see, the foreign ministers' troika is an attempt to balance these considerations, allowing each side to spin the process as they see fit.

# A Trio of Asymmetries

As noted earlier, one of the defining features of the different relationships within the Russia-China-India matrix is asymmetry. The degree to which this has come to influence their various interactions and strategic outlook is striking.

## The Sino-Russian relationship— a conditional entente

Irrespective of how one describes the Sino-Russian relationship—as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination”, an “authoritarian entente”, or an “axis of convenience”<sup>9</sup>—there is no doubt that it is the most influential of the three relationships comprising the Russia-China-India matrix. The bilateral cooperative agenda is by far the most advanced and comprehensive. Personal and institutional ties are considerably closer than in the other two relationships. After the EU, China is Russia’s biggest trading partner,<sup>10</sup> while Russia is now the largest source of Chinese oil imports.<sup>11</sup> Military cooperation is developing apace, on the back of the recent sales of Su-35 multipurpose fighters and the S-400 missile system,<sup>12</sup> as well as several very public joint exercises.<sup>13</sup> Moscow and Beijing are highly critical of US “unilateralism” and Western liberal interventionism, and oppose a number of specific Western policies, such as support for the Māidan revolution in Ukraine, attempts to unseat the Assad regime in Syria, and the deployment of missile defense installations in Eastern

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9. See [www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn); “China and Russia: the World’s New Superpower Axis?”, *The Guardian*, 7 July 2015, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com); B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Brookings and Chatham House, 2008.

10. Bilateral trade was USD 95 billion in 2014, before slumping to USD 68 billion in the following year. 2016 saw only a modest recovery, driven largely by Chinese exports to Russia—see “Chinese-Russian Trade Grows 2.2% in 2016—Customs Data”, *Sputnik*, 13 January 2017, <https://sputniknews.com>.

11. Russia accounts for some 13-14 percent of China’s total imports, slightly larger than Saudi Arabia, see “Russia Steals Saudi’s Crown as China’s Top Oil Supplier”, RT, 3 February 2016, <https://www.rt.com>. The decisive development here was the June 2013 oil supply agreement between Rosneft and CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation). This provided for the delivery of 360 million tonnes of oil over a period of 25 years.

12. C. Clover, “Russia Resumes Advanced Weapons Sales to China”, *Financial Times*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com>.

13. These included Joint Sea 2015 in the eastern Mediterranean; Joint Sea II in the Sea of Japan; and, most recently, Joint Sea 2016 in the South China Sea.

Europe and Northeast Asia. They also share similar views on control of the internet and “information security.”<sup>14</sup> On the surface, the Sino-Russian relationship appears to be flourishing like never before; perhaps not yet an alliance, but certainly a genuine strategic partnership that is set to become still stronger.<sup>15</sup>

And yet appearances can be deceiving. Along with the clear positives of the Sino-Russian relationship several significant negatives are also evident. The most important of these is the growing inequality of their partnership, which increasingly favors Beijing. In Central Asia, for example, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) threatens to undermine Russia’s long-time strategic primacy in the region. Similarly, the current global energy glut enables Beijing to call the shots in areas such as long-term gas cooperation, notwithstanding the apparent promise of the May 2014 gas supply agreement.<sup>16</sup> Such imbalances have not yet assumed critical proportions, and for the time being both sides identify a strong interest in emphasizing strategic congruence over incipient rivalry. For Moscow, the United States is the immediate preoccupation, while Beijing is far more focused in projecting Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific than in contesting Russian influence in Eurasia. Nevertheless, such imbalances are likely to become more salient as the economic and technological gap between the two “strategic partners” widens, and Chinese foreign policy extends its geographical horizons.

The second important caveat is that behind the façade of Sino-Russian strategic convergence there are some fundamental differences of view over the nature and demands of the international system. Moscow and Beijing agree in principle on the need for a multipolar order or “polycentric system of international relations”. But their understandings of what this entails diverge substantially. Whereas Moscow sees the world in largely tripolar terms, shaped above all by the balance of power between the United States, Russia, and China, Beijing’s view is more akin to a bipolar-plus arrangement, dominated by the one truly global relationship—between the United States and China. Whereas the Kremlin believes in the imminent

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14. This is reflected, for example, in the two presidents’ joint statement on “Cooperation in information space development”, *China Daily*, 26 June 2016, [www.chinadaily.com.cn](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn). See also A. Soldatov and I. Borogan, “Putin Brings China’s Great Firewall to Russia in Cybersecurity Pact”, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

15. In a break from the past, some Chinese policy thinkers are calling for Beijing to abandon its reservations about alliances in general, and to form one with Russia—see interview with Yan Xuetong, *New York Times*, 9 February 2016, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

16. This agreement envisaged the delivery of an annual 38 billion cubic meters over a period of 30 years, to be transported through a new pipeline, “Power of Siberia”, from eastern Siberia to northeast China.

demise of a US-led order, Zhongnanhai is more circumspect both in its diagnosis and the implications for Chinese policy. Far from seeking to supplant Washington as global leader, Beijing seeks to operate within the broad parameters of the current international system, albeit with a much enhanced say in its management. It recognizes, too, that China has been the largest beneficiary of Western-led globalization over the past three decades; indeed, it sometimes complains that the West has sought to turn back the tide of globalization and trade liberalization—a refrain that will become more insistent if US president Donald Trump follows through on his campaign promise to “protect American jobs”.<sup>17</sup> In this, its position could hardly be more different from that of Russia, which sees itself as a victim of globalization, and is therefore committed to overturning the existing international order, while becoming more inward-looking in its own developmental model.

The authoritarian regimes in Moscow and Beijing see the world through realist eyes. They believe in the continuing relevance of geopolitics, and the utility of hard power. They are profoundly irritated by Western lectures about values, the rule of law, and good governance, perceiving rampant hypocrisy and ulterior geopolitical and commercial agendas. However, when it comes to converting these sentiments into concrete action, their approaches contrast markedly. Putin has shown an increasing disposition to use lethal force—in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria since 2015. Xi, on the other hand, has refrained until now from exercising such means, preferring instead to use the *potential* threat of military action to secure compliance with Chinese interests. Although this may yet come, Beijing’s relative moderation (compared to Russia) nevertheless reflects a more cautious, risk-averse mindset, as well as confidence in its ability to deploy other instruments effectively, such as development assistance programs, large-scale trade and investment, and cultural diplomacy. It is revealing that although China has benefited to some extent from the crisis in Russia-West relations following Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Syria, such actions have nevertheless caused it some concern.<sup>18</sup>

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17. “Trump Details 7-Point Plan ‘to Protect American Jobs’”, *Fox News*, 24 October 2016, [insider.foxnews.com](http://insider.foxnews.com). Xi used the platform of the 2017 Davos Forum to position China as the defender of global free trade—see “Xi Jinping Delivers Robust Defence of Globalisation at Davos”, *Financial Times*, 17 January 2017, <https://www.ft.com>.

18. Even advocates of a Sino–Russian alliance, such as Yan Xuetong, warn against Beijing being sucked into foreign policy adventures: “China should be very cautious about participating in military conflicts in the Middle East. China should learn a lesson from Russia’s military involvement in Syria”—interview in *The New York Times*, 22 February 2016, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). Such concerns weigh especially heavily with more mainstream Chinese observers.

Despite appearances, Russia and China have very different attitudes toward cooperation with the United States. Moscow has shown diminishing interest in this, except in specific instances, such as “de-confliction” arrangements in Syria. This is partly a response to the modest economic substance in the US-Russia relationship even prior to the imposition of Western sanctions against Moscow. But it also highlights the Kremlin’s determination to reduce to the bare minimum Russian dependence on what many unequivocally identify as *the* enemy. Beijing’s attitude is almost the polar opposite. Despite rising tensions in the western Pacific, it has continued to regard US-China cooperation as essential, given the close interdependence of the two countries. As a result, their bilateral engagement takes place in three modes—cooperative, competitive, and confrontational—of which the first remains the most important.

The differences in Russian and Chinese attitudes to the international order, globalization, and relations with the United States limit their capacity—and will—for strategic coordination. It is one thing to conduct joint naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean or the western Pacific, it is quite another to act as a cohesive anti-American bloc in regional and global affairs. It is symptomatic that whereas Russian policy-makers and thinkers are wont to publicize Sino-Russian convergence *vis-à-vis* the West, and the United States in particular, the Chinese have been anxious to downplay suggestions of challenging Western interests and values.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, Moscow and Beijing pursue individual agendas that sometimes converge, but also diverge. They agree on the flaws of the US-led international system, but not about what might replace this. They identify a common interest in maximizing their “strategic partnership”, but have different ideas as to how this might develop over the longer term—one side imagining a marriage of equals, the other a looser relationship in which China is clearly the senior partner. Such contrasts are not just relevant at the bilateral level, but also have implications for the practicability of the BRICS and RIC as alternative structures of global governance—as we shall see.

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19. Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016, p. 97.



## China and India— the compartmentalized relationship

The China-India relationship reveals two different types of asymmetry. The first is the conventional kind, whereby China is the dominant partner in the relationship. Its economy is five times larger than India's; it possesses considerably greater military power; it is a member of the UN Security Council P-5 while India is not; and the balance of bilateral trade is heavily in its favor. This lopsidedness is evident also in attitudes toward each other. Unsurprisingly, China looms large in Indian political consciousness, whereas India until recently has barely featured in Chinese public discourse.<sup>20</sup>

There is another kind of asymmetry as well, which is the dichotomy between expanding commercial ties, and an increasingly problematic political and security relationship. Since the landslide victory of Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 Indian general elections, this disconnect has become more evident. China has grown to be India's largest economic partner after the EU, and the prospects for further development are good.<sup>21</sup> However, these positives are overshadowed by serious political disagreements.

The most critical of these is over Kashmir, and China's active support for Pakistan. This is part of a larger alliance relationship between Beijing and Islamabad, which involves such major ventures as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), linking western China to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.<sup>22</sup> As seen from New Delhi, China is directly complicit in aggravating an existential threat against India—indeed, the most immediate and vital threat it faces.

There are other problems. The border dispute over Arunachal Pradesh is a running sore, less because of the actual territory involved (which is very small) than because of New Delhi's belief that Beijing is deliberately leaving

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20. Li Xin, "India through Chinese Eyes", *World Policy Institute*, Winter 2013, [www.worldpolicy.org](http://www.worldpolicy.org). The asymmetry of attitudes is also reflected in a conspicuous Chinese superiority complex toward India and Indians, see Chu Shulong, "A Chinese Take on India's Eastward Strategy and its Implications", ASAN Forum, 29 August 2016, [www.theasanforum.org](http://www.theasanforum.org).

21. Bilateral trade in 2015 was USD 71.6 billion. It should be noted, however, that the balance of trade is overwhelming in China's favour, see S. Patranobis, "Indian Trade Deficit with China Rises to \$45 Billion Mark", *Hindustan Times*, 13 January 2016, [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com).

22. The CPEC agreement was concluded during Xi Jinping's April 2015 visit to Pakistan. CPEC is part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, and seeks to bring together a number of infrastructural projects. The anticipated investment is USD 46 billion, but the venture is still at a very preliminary stage and there are considerable logistical, political, and security obstacles to overcome. See S. Dasgupta, "Chinese Daily Warns of Setbacks to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", *The Times of India*, 14 September 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.



the question unresolved so that it can leverage Indian insecurity for other purposes.<sup>23</sup> This, in turn, ties in with the broader question of China's growing strategic presence in South Asia. The most visible feature of this is the so-called "string of pearls"—naval bases extending from Myanmar through Bangladesh (Chittagong), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Pakistan (Gwadar) to Djibouti—but it also relates to China's expanding military links with all of India's neighbors, including land-locked countries such as Nepal. The overall effect of China's enhanced strategic presence has been to heighten Indian nervousness about strategic containment and even encirclement.<sup>24</sup>

Many of these tensions have been there for years. What has changed, however, is that the Modi government has been much more active than the previous Congress Party administration in responding to such pressures. Whereas New Delhi used to be especially solicitous of Chinese security and strategic sensitivities while underplaying its own concerns, today it is actively looking to counter Chinese moves in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.<sup>25</sup>

This is exemplified by its unprecedented strategic rapprochement with the United States. Although there have been periods of close engagement in the past, notably following George W. Bush's 2005 decision to resume peaceful nuclear cooperation, Modi's diplomacy signals a potentially tectonic shift in Indian foreign policy. For the first time in its history, New Delhi is departing from the Nehruvian tradition of non-alignment toward a position where it has in effect associated itself with the United States in response to the growing power and footprint of China.<sup>26</sup> In the process, it is moving from an international stance that has always privileged multilateralism to one where geopolitics is now seen as both respectable

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23. The prominent Indian commentator Brahma Chellaney put this well some years ago: "an unresolved, partially indistinct frontier fits well with [Beijing's] interests *vis-à-vis* India. Firstly, the status quo helps to keep India under Chinese strategic pressure. Secondly, it pins down along the Himalayas hundreds of thousands of Indian troops who otherwise would be available against China's 'all-weather ally', Pakistan... Thirdly, an unresolved border arms Beijing with the option to turn on military heat along the already-tense frontier if India dared to play the Tibet card or enter into an overt, anti-China military alliance with the United States"; see B. Chellaney, *Asian Juggernaut*, Harper, 2010, p. 170.

24. A recent Chinese opinion piece appears to recognize that Beijing sees potential for useful leverage here: "it would not necessarily be a bad thing if an increasingly close relationship between China and Bangladesh puts some pressure on New Delhi to rethink its strategy in South Asia and encourages it to put more effort into improving relations with China", Hu Weijia, "India Has Nothing to Fear From Closer Relationship Between China and Bangladesh", *Global Times*, 12 October 2016, [www.globaltimes.cn](http://www.globaltimes.cn).

25. C. Raja Mohan, "Delhi Seems Ready to Compete with Beijing Where It Must and Cooperate Where It Can", *Indian Express*, 16 April 2016, <http://indianexpress.com>.

26. A. Tellis, "The Whirlwind in Washington", *India Today*, 19 June 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

and necessary. This is reflected above all in Modi's call for India to play a "leading role, rather than just a balancing force, globally."<sup>27</sup> New Delhi's developing political and military ties with Tokyo are also consistent with this new trend. China, if not yet the enemy, nevertheless represents an overarching strategic challenge that will no longer be ignored.<sup>28</sup>

The implications of this for the Russia-China-India matrix could be game-changing. In the context of an ever more disorderly world, they foreshadow mounting contradictions and strains. Although it is possible these can be managed, there is no compelling reason to assume so, and certainly not without strenuous efforts on all sides. The strategic rivalry between China and India could well become more overt and multi-dimensional, along with an increased risk of unintended consequences.<sup>29</sup>

## Russia and India-the poor relation

The relationship between Moscow and New Delhi is by some distance the least substantial within the matrix. Although India remains Russia's largest arms customer and there is significant cooperation in the civilian nuclear sector, bilateral trade is very modest—less than USD 8 billion in 2015.<sup>30</sup> In general, Russia and India feature well down the list of the other's foreign policy priorities. Moscow's "turn to the East", for example, has centered overwhelmingly on China, and after that extended to Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and East Asia. New Delhi, whether under a Congress or BJP administration, has focused primarily on its region, multilateral diplomacy, and relations with the United States. Although some Indians look back wistfully to the era of Soviet-Indian friendship under Leonid Brezhnev and Indira Gandhi, Russia has featured only intermittently and peripherally in recent Indian foreign policy.<sup>31</sup>

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27. Prime Minister's message to heads of Indian diplomatic missions, 7 February 2015, <http://pib.nic.in>. For a more detailed discussion of this concept, see A.Tellis, "India as a Leading Power", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

28. C. Raja Mohan, "Delhi Seems Ready to Compete with Beijing Where it Must and Cooperate Where it Can", *op. cit* [25]

29. Chu Shulong remarks pointedly that "China does not like to see India play a serious security role in the Asia-Pacific, when issues involve China", see "A Chinese Take on India's Eastward Strategy and its Implications", *op. cit* [20]. Given that Beijing identifies a strong Chinese interest in nearly all Asia-Pacific issues, one can interpret this as a general warning not to "interfere" in the region's affairs.

30. "Bilaterals Relations: India-Russia Relations", July 2016, <http://www.indianembassy.ru>.

31. V. Shikin, "Russia-India Strategic Partnership: Have We Hit a Plateau?", Russian International Affairs Council, 16 November 2016, [russiancouncil.ru](http://russiancouncil.ru); also K. Zubacheva, "Russia and India: An Orphaned Relationship?", *Russia Direct*, 6 July 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org>.

Part of the explanation for this comparative neglect is the long list of more compelling priorities elsewhere. But another key reason lies in the dominating presence of China in each country's strategic calculus. Moscow's "China-first" policy in Asia has had a constraining effect on its engagement with other Asian players, especially with countries that have difficult relations with Beijing, as is the case with India (and Japan). Although Sino-Russian official statements routinely speak of "win-win" cooperation, and of their relationship not being directed at third parties, such assurances are of cold comfort to New Delhi. Thus, when the Indian government sees joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, it assumes the worst—that Sino-Russian partnership is morphing into an alliance or quasi-alliance, from which India stands to lose.<sup>32</sup> Such perceptions may be mistaken, but that does not make them any the less influential.

Similarly, New Delhi's rapprochement with Washington, which incorporates such steps as designating India as a "major defense partner" of the United States, sets it increasingly at odds with Moscow (as well as Beijing).<sup>33</sup> At a time when Sino-American tensions are rising, particularly in Asia, and US-Russian relations have yet to recover from the acute crisis of the late Obama years, the larger strategic environment reflects more zero-sum than positive-sum thinking. Closer US-India relations not only accentuate Chinese fears of containment, but also risk pushing Moscow further toward Beijing, and placing Russia-India security cooperation on the back-burner. In this latter connection, Moscow is increasingly reaching out to Islamabad because it feels that in many respects it is Pakistan which is the more useful security partner, given its close ties with the Taliban and other Islamist organizations.<sup>34</sup> Moscow's evolving thinking was reflected in the first-ever Russia-Pakistan military exercises in September 2016. Although these were very modest, the mere fact that they took place was significant, not least because Moscow ignored Indian objections.<sup>35</sup>

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32. *ibid.*

33. The designation of India as a "major defense partner" came during Modi's visit to the United States in June 2016—"The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>. It will reportedly give India the same access to US defense technologies as enjoyed by America's closest allies, see C. Raja Mohan, "Strategic Symphony", *The Indian Express*, 10 June 2016, <http://indianexpress.com>. It also represents concrete follow-up to the "US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region" of January 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>.

34. "Russia, Pakistan conduct first-ever joint military drills", *RT*, 27 September 2016, [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com), also D. Mitra, "As India Tilts Westwards, Russia Looks to Pakistan to Widen Its Strategic Options", *The Wire*, 13 October 2016, <http://thewire.in>.

35. "India Conveys its Displeasure with Russia-Pak Military Exercise", *The Tribune*, 11 October 2016, [www.tribuneindia.com](http://www.tribuneindia.com); see also K. Zubacheva, "What's Wrong with the Russia-India Relationship?", *Russia Direct*, 25 September 2016, [www.russia-direct.org](http://www.russia-direct.org).

The issue of asymmetry is once again crucial. For all its many problems, Russia remains a vastly more influential international player than India. Bilaterally, neither country is critical to the other, especially by comparison with China. Even strong areas of cooperation, such as arms transfers and the civilian nuclear sector, face serious challenges in the form of increasing Western competition for the Indian market, as Modi pursues an active policy of diversification. In the margins of the 2016 BRICS summit in Goa, Russia and India signed agreements for the delivery of the S-400 missile system (said to be worth around USD 5 billion), and laid the foundations for units 3 and 4 of the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu. Yet a month earlier, New Delhi and Paris had concluded a deal for the Rafale fighter worth Euro 7.87 billion, while in June the US firm Westinghouse agreed to build six new-generation nuclear reactors in Andhra Pradesh. In theory, Moscow and New Delhi are interested in expanding political and economic ties, not least because this would enhance their strategic flexibility. But the practical obstacles are daunting. Somewhat against their will, both sides find themselves frequently having to choose—China in Russia’s case, and the United States in India’s.<sup>36</sup>

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36. M. Korostikov, “Rossiia, Indiiia i Kitaj popitalis’ najti chto-to obsheche” [Russia, India and China tried to find something in common], *Kommersant*, 19 April 2016, <http://kommersant.ru>.

# New Structures, Old Habits

Given such stark imbalances, and faced with uncomfortable choices, Russian, Chinese, and Indian policy-makers have looked to trilateral and especially multilateral structures to mediate differences and develop new opportunities for cooperation. Just in the past few years, there has been an extraordinary proliferation of international, regional, and sub-regional organizations. In addition to existing institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation grouping (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS, and the RIC framework, we have seen the emergence of the G-20, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly known as OBOR—“One belt, one road”).

This proliferation implicitly calls into question the viability of the US-led international order. Regardless of their effectiveness, such structures respond to a real demand for new forms of engagement. At the same time, the responses of Russia, China, and India to this need reflect their individual priorities. Moscow’s commitment to the demise of US global leadership means that it seeks to delegitimize and supplant international institutions dominated by the West, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Beijing’s priority, by contrast, is to reform these bodies so that they better reflect China’s growing status and influence. To this end, it is prepared to develop new regional structures, such as the AIIB, but more as supplements to the existing order. New Delhi’s emphasis is narrower and focused principally on reforming the UN Security Council (UNSC)—or, rather, expanding the P-5 so that India becomes a Permanent Member with full powers, including exercise of the veto. It is happy to participate in other non-Western mechanisms, such as the BRICS, but scarcely views them as the basis of a viable, non-Western order. Its purpose there is more to observe and be seen, and to reaffirm India’s independent foreign policy identity.

## The BRICS

Divergent national priorities make it very difficult to achieve effective interaction within multilateral organizations. This has been especially evident in the BRICS, where member-states have struggled to translate rhetoric into substantive progress. Apart from the philosophical problem of conflicting visions for the BRICS—Russia’s ambitious agenda contrasting with the narrower, development-led aims of China and India—there are also significant policy differences: over the large-scale use of local currencies in intra-BRICS transactions;<sup>37</sup> counter-terrorism, where China and India hold opposing positions on the complicity of Pakistan;<sup>38</sup> and the internet, where New Delhi’s vision of “multi-stakeholderism” could hardly be more at odds with Moscow and Beijing’s state-centered approach to “information security” and “cyber-sovereignty”.<sup>39</sup>

There has been much self-congratulation about the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA), through which the BRICS countries are to fund various development projects.<sup>40</sup> This has been hailed as a watershed moment when the group moved from being a talking-shop into a body capable of making real decisions. Yet projected spending is very modest—each member to contribute USD 2 billion over a period of seven years—compared to the far greater funds that China, on its own, is investing in its Silk Road Fund (USD 40 billion), the AIIB (USD 50 billion), and in individual countries (USD 17 billion to Kazakhstan by 2015).<sup>41</sup>

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37. P. Vaidyanathan Iyer, “Why BRICS Trade in Local Currency Doesn’t Work for India”, *Indian Express*, 13 July 2015, <http://indianexpress.com>.

38. Modi used the BRICS summit in Goa to identify China’s ally Pakistan as, in effect, a terrorist state, “India’s Modi, at Summit, Calls Pakistan Mother-Ship of Terrorism”, Reuters, 16 October 2016, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

39. S. Tharoor, “The BRICS Summit: A Look at Some of the Issues”, Huffington Post, 13 July 2015, [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com); also A. Sukumar, “A BRICS Vision for the Internet”, *The Hindu*, 9 July 2015, [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com); and W. Yuxi, “China-Russia Cybersecurity Cooperation: Working Towards Cyber-Sovereignty”, Jackson School of International Studies, 21 June 2016, <https://jsis.washington.edu>.

40. The NDB and CRA were formally established at the 2014 BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil—<http://brics.itamaraty.gov.br>.

41. Technically, each BRICS member should make available USD 10 billion over a period of seven years. However, only USD 2 billion of this sum is to be paid-in capital, with the remainder being callable (in effect, reserve) capital in case of emergency. See A. Guryanova, “The BRICS New Development Bank Outlines Its Major Priorities”, interview with Leslie Maasdorp, Vice-President and Chief Financial Officer of the NDB, *Russia Direct*, 1 September 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org>. See also B. Lo, “The Illusion of Convergence”, *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 92, March 2016, pp. 21-22.

Despite its limitations, the NDB and the CRA do at least point to how Russia, China, and India might cooperate in multilateral structures—by minimizing political grandstanding and instead favoring economic ties and development assistance. It is questionable, though, whether Moscow wants the BRICS to go down this route, since this would privilege China’s comparative advantages (economic) rather than Russia’s (political and military). Tellingly, Putin has made no secret of his desire to see the BRICS grow into a “full-fledged mechanism of strategic cooperation.”<sup>42</sup> That he remains far from achieving this goal is not through any want of commitment, but because China and India are keen to ensure that the BRICS does not assume the identity of an anti-Western bloc.<sup>43</sup>

## The SCO

For a long time, Beijing resisted Russian attempts to bring India into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The official line was that too many members could undermine the cohesiveness of the organization, which had originated in the 1996 “Shanghai Five” agreement on confidence-building measures along the former Sino-Soviet border, involving Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The more specific—and real—concern was that new member-states might import their own conflicts into the SCO’s agenda, thereby undermining its capacity to operate as a viable security framework. Thus, Iran was barred on the grounds that it was still subject to UN sanctions, while India and Pakistan were rebuffed because of their continuing confrontation over Kashmir.<sup>44</sup> There were also ulterior motives. Moscow saw value in Indian membership as a means of diluting China’s growing primacy within the organization, while Beijing resisted it for precisely the same reason.

The decision at the 2016 SCO summit to admit India represented something of a geopolitical compromise between Moscow and Beijing. The organization would acquire greater international credibility, but the balance of influence within the SCO would not change, since the entry of India would be counterbalanced by membership for China’s ally, Pakistan. These maneuverings were a reminder that the SCO is primarily important for its symbolic value than for its actual contribution to regional security.

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42. “Putin Says BRICS Should Focus on Key World Issues”, Sputnik, 22 March 2013, <https://sputniknews.com>

43. P. Kozlov, “Rossiya zhdet ot chlenov stran SHOS i BRIKS podderzhki protiv zapada” [Russia expects the support of SCO and BRICS members against the West], *Vedomosti*, 8 July 2015, [www.vedomosti.ru](http://www.vedomosti.ru).

44. W. Piekos and E. Economy, “The Risks and Rewards of SCO Expansion”, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), expert brief, 8 July 2015, <http://www.cfr.org>.



Indian and Pakistani membership will not change this reality. The concerns that had previously delayed consideration of their membership—the risk to consensus-building, and the importation of additional rivalries and conflicts—are more valid than ever. Tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, and New Delhi and Beijing, are greater than they have been for some years.

## The RIC troika

The foreign ministers of Russia, China and India have been meeting every year in the troika format since 2001; the 14<sup>th</sup> meeting took place in April 2016. The regularity of these gatherings is encouraging insofar as it reflects a desire to focus on areas of agreement and maintain a functional level of engagement. Unfortunately, there is little substance to show for this institutional continuity. RIC communiqués are exercises of the bland: full of motherhood statements about a “strong commitment to the United Nations” and the importance of establishing a “just and equitable international order based on international law”; the usual condemnations of international terrorism and narcotics trafficking; and expressions of concern about conflict situations around the world, from Ukraine to the Middle East to Afghanistan. Such documents replicate the spirit and much of the wording of declarations from the annual BRICS summits—so much so that some Russian observers have questioned the utility of the RIC format.<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps revealing that Putin himself has suggested that the main value of the triangle is as a building block for the BRICS.<sup>46</sup>

The formalistic functioning of the RIC highlights the lack of progress in trilateral cooperation. Somewhat in the manner of countless Russia-EU summits, the main point of the process appears to be to talk up consensus while glossing over the many differences. The problem, however, is that this show looks less convincing with each passing year. Although the degree of likemindedness between Moscow and Beijing has been exaggerated, there is no doubt that they are much closer to each other than either is to New Delhi. The result is that the troika, such as it is, operates in a very lopsided way, with India being almost a third wheel—out of sync and marginalized. This was underlined at the most recent BRICS summit in

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45. Comments by G. Toloraya, in M. Korostikov, “Can Russia Straddle Between India and China?”, *Russia Direct*, 21 April 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org>.

46. “It was [Primakov’s] idea to develop close cooperation between the strategic triangle of Russia, China and India. This proposal was seen as something utopian and even harmful at first, but today, we see how quickly the BRICS group, which began in trilateral format, is gaining weight and influence in the world”, Putin speech at the Primakov Readings International Forum, 30 November 2016, [en.kremlin.ru](http://en.kremlin.ru).



Goa. India attempted to introduce language in the joint communique condemning state-supported terrorism and the role of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed organization, which it accused of perpetrating an attack on an Indian army base in Kashmir in which 19 soldiers were killed. But it failed in the face of strong Chinese opposition, backed up by Russia.<sup>47</sup> Such episodes demonstrate, too, that any thought that Moscow might be able to mediate differences between Beijing and New Delhi remains purely hypothetical.

## Larger multilateral organizations

Common membership in the AIIB and G-20, in addition to the BRICS, could in theory open up options for policy coordination in certain areas, such as joint action to maximize their voting shares in the IMF and World Bank. But even here the possibilities are limited, given that the Chinese economy is so much larger than Russia's or India's, and would therefore merit a commensurately greater share. There is a further complication, too. Although all three countries declare allegiance to the primacy of the UN, international rule of law, and the "democratization" of international relations, there is a pronounced divide between the predominantly bilateralist approach of Russia and China on the one hand, and the multilateralist tradition of India on the other. Putin and Xi have demonstrated on many occasions their strong preference for engagement involving as few parties as possible—whether it is the Minsk process over Ukraine, or China's promotion of bilateral negotiations over the South China Sea. This exclusivist stance is also reflected in their resistance to meaningful reform of the UN Security Council, where they see no interest in diluting their existing privileges.<sup>48</sup> Equally, India's preference for multilateral diplomacy (except in relation to its immediate neighborhood) is hardly disinterested. It identifies, rightly, greater scope to be a global actor in a multilateralist environment than in a *de facto* Concert of Great Powers, where it would find itself playing a distinctly secondary role (this much is already evident within the BRICS framework).

We should be under no illusions, then, about the tremendous obstacles to trilateral cooperation within larger international organizations. For example, the fact that the AIIB is a "made in Beijing" project is a constraint not just for New Delhi but also for Moscow. China is unmistakably the

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47. "BRICS Summit: China Bulldozed India's Security Concerns as Russia Looked the Other Way", *Times of India*, 17 October 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

48. For a first-hand account of the obstructionism of the P-5, including Russia and China, see K. Mahhubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, The West, and The Logic of One World*, *op. cit* [2] pp. 112-16.

leading player, politically and financially—a position reflected in a voting share that allows it to block any proposals not to its liking.<sup>49</sup> While it may well exercise restraint given its desire to legitimize a still fledgling body, this would be its decision rather than one necessarily born of a wider consensus.

The problem with the G-20 is different, but no less challenging. Although Russia, China, and India are all members, the group continues to be dominated by the leading Western economies, numerically and in terms of financial clout. In theory, the RIC matrix might be able to function as a cohesive force within it, but experience has demonstrated otherwise, and there is little reason to think that things will change anytime soon. Under Modi the Indian economy has become more liberalized and globalized, bringing it closer to the interests of the advanced Western nations than to countries such as Russia, whose economy is increasingly inward-looking. In the circumstances, the most that can realistically be expected is that Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi may occasionally be able to coordinate their actions in pursuing discrete, but limited, tactical objectives.

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49. C. Huang, "Voting Rights Reflect Beijing's Leading Role in AIIB", *South China Morning Post*, 30 June 2015, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).

# Key Themes

Several themes emerge from this brief review of the various bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral relationships involving Russia, China, and India. The most important is an asymmetry of capabilities that ensures that the three countries have different perspectives and purposes. Sometimes they are able to work through their differences and focus on what unites them, such as opposing US “unilateralism” and Western interventionism.<sup>50</sup> They agree that the world should become multipolar, both because they regard US domination of the international system as unhealthy (and increasingly anachronistic), and because a more “democratic” world order implies greater influence and status for themselves. The challenge, however, is to translate such sentiments into actual cooperation, especially when their own inter-relationships are so unequal. Even before one gets to specifics, the matter of “strategic coordination” between them raises the obvious question “on what (and whose) terms”—the tight, quasi-institutionalized model favored by Moscow, the more flexible arrangements envisaged by Beijing, or the much looser and less politically charged vision of New Delhi.

Asymmetry does not in itself preclude constructive engagement. If that were the case, then how would one account for the success of the United States in maintaining a network of alliance relationships and close strategic partnerships across the world for seven decades? Similarly, history is often cited as an all-purpose explanation for countries failing to cooperate with each other. Yet there are plenty of examples that prove that old enmities can be transcended—witness the evolution of Franco-German friendship post-World War II, and, more recently, the Sino-Russian rapprochement over the past quarter of a century.

So why shouldn’t Russia, China, and India be able to overcome—or at least manage—their asymmetries and historical challenges to achieve a new quality of cooperation? To answer this question, we need to consider several other factors that have shaped their interaction: strategic ambition and the globalization of their respective foreign policies; strategic mistrust and security anxieties; the role of instrumentalism; and the continuing centrality of the United States and the US-led global order.

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50. See, for example, the joint communique of the 14<sup>th</sup> RIC foreign ministers meeting, <http://www.mea.gov.in>.

## Strategic ambition and mistrust

Next to the many evident dissimilarities between Russia, China, and India are also some shared characteristics that are no less influential. One is a heightened strategic ambition. Their willingness to question US global leadership is partly born of dissatisfaction with the way Washington has (mis)managed things, but it also reflects a determination to carve out a larger international role for its own sake. Thus, Moscow is keen to reassert Russia as a global power, if not at the level of the Soviet Union, then certainly in the first rank of great powers. China, which for years had sought to limit its international role and responsibilities for fear of over-extending itself, has under Xi pursued a notably more globalist and multidimensional approach. India, too, is striving to become a “leading power” and globally significant actor.<sup>51</sup>

With three such ambitious powers, geopolitical competition is much more probable, while the former “rules” and limitations no longer necessarily apply. Constructs such as privileged spheres of interest or influence have become increasingly tenuous. For instance, Moscow may regard post-Soviet Eurasia as its strategic space (*prostranstvo*),<sup>52</sup> but this primacy is being steadily eroded—by Western “interference”, the growing hunger for sovereignty among the ex-Soviet republics, and most of all by the astonishingly rapid expansion of Chinese influence. Likewise, India’s long-time dominance in South Asia face growing challenges from China and the assertiveness of once pliant neighbors such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. And notwithstanding China’s seemingly unstoppable transformation into a global superpower, it too must operate in a more complex and fluid environment in the Asia-Pacific.

The fragility of once ubiquitous constructs gives rise to considerable stresses. Even in the most favorable circumstances, it would have been counter-intuitive for Russia, whose strategic culture has for centuries been centered in the primacy of geopolitics, to move to a more benign, positive-sum view of international affairs. But this is especially so when the world is in such flux, and Moscow’s relations with the West have deteriorated to critical levels. Although Beijing routinely proclaims its commitment to the principles of “win-win” cooperation, it perceives others as being motivated

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51. It has been estimated that Modi undertook at least 40 overseas trips in his first two years in office, A. Tellis, “NDA at 2: Modi’s Unexpected Successes in Foreign Policy”, *Hindustan Times*, 25 May 2016, [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com).

52. The notion of states as sovereign “spatial—geographical phenomena” contesting “space” is discussed in J. Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia’s Influence Abroad*, Chatham House, 2013, p. 12.

by baser intentions—strategic containment and encirclement, in the case of the United States and its allies (such as Japan). And it is a sign of the times that New Delhi, which has historically eschewed geopolitics as being anachronistic, has shifted toward a more “traditional” view that recognizes that power projection and strategic balancing matter a great deal. In this connection, it is vitally concerned about the implications of Sino-Russian convergence, and China’s increasing assertiveness in the western Pacific and South Asia.<sup>53</sup>

All this highlights the disjunction between the vocabulary of shared interests and challenges on the one hand, and continued strategic mistrust on the other. Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi declare that the threats of international terrorism and regional separatism demand a united response. Yet such homilies are undermined by sharply conflicting interests and objectives. Thus, for India Pakistan represents an existential threat, most immediately in the intelligence, financial, and logistical support Islamabad gives to terrorist groups, whereas for China Pakistan is a valued “all-weather” ally.<sup>54</sup> Trust can be elusive even in a relatively favorable context, such as the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership”. Many in the Putin elite remain uncomfortable about the extent of Russia’s dependence on China post-Crimea, not to mention the widening asymmetry of their relationship. They may no longer see China as a direct threat to Russia’s territorial integrity, but fears of strategic displacement, loss of economic control, and the erosion of civilizational identity remain very much alive.

## Instrumentalism and compartmentalization

Given the growing foreign policy ambitions of Russia, China, and India, and the enduring mistrust (or at least strategic caution) between them, the question arises as to how they can best engage with each other. Two broad approaches have emerged in the course of their mutual dealings: instrumentalism, and compartmentalization.

At first sight, an instrumental approach would seem to contravene the true spirit of cooperation, since it tends to be motivated by tactical expediency rather than strategic likemindedness. Yet instrumentalism also

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53. See A. Tellis, “India as a Leading Power”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 April 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org>; also N. Unnikrishnan and U. Purushothaman, *Trends in Russia-China Relations: Implications for India*, Observer Research Foundation, 2015, p. 99.

54. S. Patranobis, “China Defends ‘All-Weather’ Pak After Modi Calls It ‘Mothership of Terror’”, *Hindustan Times*, 17 October 2016, <http://www.hindustantimes.com>.

reflects a certain realism and pragmatism. Rather than pretend at a deeper convergence, it is based on the premise that it is more useful to abandon “romantic” notions of likemindedness (except for propaganda purposes); get out of the relationship(s) what one can; and minimize or manage any disagreements.

Such a cold-blooded approach has facilitated the growth of the Sino-Russian partnership during the past two decades. This has benefited from relatively low expectations. Instead of successes being taken for granted, they have been enthusiastically talked up, while setbacks and disappointments have been downplayed. Meanwhile, both sides have sought to exploit the relationship for leverage with third parties, principally the United States. Although this has rarely been effective, it has not damaged the Sino-Russian relationship itself, since Moscow and Beijing have accepted the “rules of the game” by behaving in a similarly cynical spirit. Contrast this with interaction between Russia and the United States/Europe over the same period. Until relatively recently,<sup>55</sup> this was accompanied by extravagant illusions on all sides, especially regarding Russia’s “integration” into the West and mythical progress on modernization. Such lack of realism contributed to numerous and serious misunderstandings, mounting disappointments, and inevitable blowback. The belief in likemindedness proved a significant constraint to real cooperation, unlike in the Sino-Russian case where the pretense of likemindedness has facilitated engagement because both sides have understood its limits (and artificiality).

Sino-Russian engagement has profited, too, from compartmentalization—the capacity to develop certain areas of cooperation without being overly hindered by difficulties in other parts of the relationship. The generally positive character of their interaction has been maintained because awkward issues, such as China’s expanding footprint in Central Asia, and the lack of progress in gas cooperation, are more or less quarantined. Conscious of the bigger picture, both sides remain committed to driving the overall relationship forward.

Such compartmentalization (or quarantining) has been likewise evident in the other two relationships that make up the Russia-China-India matrix. Bilateral cooperation between Moscow and New Delhi has grown—albeit from a very low base—notwithstanding significant differences in world-view and political values, while Sino-Indian economic ties have so

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55. The disintegration of Western illusions about likemindedness with Putin’s Russia became increasingly evident during 2012. That said, it took Moscow’s annexation of Crimea to disabuse some of the more optimistic observers.

far survived worsening security and strategic tensions between Beijing and New Delhi. Tellingly, even with India's shift toward America, Modi continues to tout for Chinese trade and investment, and access to Russian arms and civilian nuclear technology.<sup>56</sup>

The outstanding question is whether instrumentalism and compartmentalization are sustainable in the longer term. Can Sino-Indian economic ties develop apace despite growing political and strategic stresses? Can Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia coalesce, or at least not come into conflict, against the backdrop of an ever more ambitious Chinese foreign policy? In the latter case, the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, the two sides agreed in May 2015 to marry Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB).<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, tangible outcomes from this agreement have been lacking, with the Chinese exhibiting a preference for alternative schemes, such as the Maritime Silk Route, and various projects in and through Central Asia.<sup>58</sup>

As long as expectations remain modest, and Russia, China, and India are able to accept the shortcomings of their various interactions, they may be able to preserve a rough equilibrium. There is a danger, however, that Moscow and Beijing, and perhaps in time New Delhi, may come to believe the hype about strategic and ideational convergence—as occurred between Russia and the West during the 1990s and a large part of the 2000s. In this event, the outcome of such optimism could turn out to be not a “new world order” based on “full-fledged strategic cooperation”, but growing geopolitical frictions and mutual alienation.

## **The continuing centrality of the United States ... and the US-led global order**

Much will depend on the larger international context. Ironically, one of the areas where perceptions of the three countries converge is in their view of the United States as the main external reference point for their respective foreign policies. As noted earlier, attitudes to engagement with Washington have differed fundamentally—Moscow's openly adversarial stance toward the Obama administration contrasting with Beijing's mixed approach (combining cooperation and competition), and New Delhi's pro-American

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56. This is exemplified by the recent deal over the S-400 missile system, as well as an agreement to jointly produce 200 Kamov 226T helicopters.

57. Although the SREB and BRI are sometimes conflated, the former is a subset of the latter.

58. A. Gabuev, “China's One Belt, One Road Initiative and the Sino-Russian entente”, interview for the National Bureau of Asian Research, 9 August 2016, <http://www.nbr.org>.

tilt. But common to all of them is the *centrality* of the United States. Washington's actions have had a tremendous impact on the Russia-China-India matrix, both in terms of individual relationships and as a whole. Whatever the objective rationale for Sino-Russian partnership, for example, difficulties with the United States have been a major catalyst for the strategic rapprochement of recent years. Conversely, Modi's clear prioritization of engagement with Washington has further undermined the (already poor) prospects of policy coordination with Russia and China.

The centrality of the United States raises an additional point, which is that for all its many shortcomings the US-led global order remains pre-eminent. Moscow may seek to overturn this order, and Beijing and New Delhi to reform it, but none of the three has identified, much less made significant progress to creating, an alternative system or set of "universal" norms and values. A hypothetical retrenchment of US foreign policy under Trump could lead them to take on new responsibilities, but for the time being institutions such as the BRICS framework and the AIIB are, at best, supplementary bodies. In these circumstances, Russia-China-India trilateral cooperation remains essentially rhetorical, scarcely masking the reality that each of these parties is far more focused on the United States than they are on each other. Much diminished it may be, but the US-led order continue to shape, for better or worse, their various interactions.



# Outlook—The Beginning or the End of Trilateralism?

Given the continuing international primacy of the United States, and growing tensions within the Russia-China-India matrix, it is tempting to believe that we may be witnessing the demise of trilateralism, such as it is or was. In particular, Modi's "turn to America" suggests that the Primakovian vision of a non-Western troika is as unrealistic as ever. The list of disagreements between Russia and China on the one hand, and India on the other, is truly daunting. They range from the general—contrasting visions of world order and multipolarity—to more specific differences, including Kashmir, the South China Sea, terrorism, Tibet, freedom of the internet, and UN Security Council reform. With few exceptions, such as a common dislike of Western sanctions, Russia-China-India consensus tends to be confined to issues of broad principle, where differences can be fudged through flexible interpretation and anodyne language.

That said, there are several variables that could change or at least modify the current direction of travel. One is an improvement in Sino-Indian relations, whereby the emphasis shifts from strategic competition (and anxiety) to a more cooperative security agenda that focuses on combating Islamist terrorism from Pakistan to Afghanistan to former Soviet Central Asia. Relatedly, Beijing could soften its opposition to Indian permanent membership of the UN Security Council and of less high-profile but important bodies such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).<sup>59</sup> On the economic front, Beijing may become more successful in "selling" the BRI, so that this looks less like the expansion of Chinese power in Eurasia than a vital instrument for developing a broader zone of stability, prosperity, and connectivity across the region.

There are, of course, huge obstacles to the realization of such potential, and it would be naïve to imagine that either China or India will abandon their geopolitical aspirations and insecurities anytime soon. Nevertheless, a more benign yet enterprising foreign policy out of Beijing might eventually allay New Delhi's fears while giving India a genuine stake in Chinese success. Conversely, escalation of Beijing's aggressive power

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59. C. Raja Mohan, "Raja Mandala: What Pranab Must Say to Beijing", *Indian Express*, 24 May 2016, <http://indianexpress.com>.

projection in the western Pacific and South Asia would result in just the opposite outcomes—a more militant India, increasingly aligned with the United States and Japan in counterbalancing China.

Another variable that could change the equation in favor of greater trilateral cooperation would be the return of the Congress Party to power at the next (2019) Indian general elections—improbable though this seems today. More likely, a returning BJP government might have to operate under greater constraints in foreign and domestic policy. In this event, New Delhi could rein back its overtly pro-Washington line and revert to the more traditional multi-vectored approach that has characterized Indian foreign policy over the past few decades. Such an outcome could improve the prospects for non-Western trilateral and multilateral structures, such as the RIC and BRICS. Yet even in this “best case” scenario success is hardly assured. It is worth noting that in the long years of Congress Party rule, trilateral cooperation with China and Russia was nominal at best, and bilateral relations with Beijing problematic. So a change of regime in New Delhi might not achieve very much, except a return to the unsatisfactory status quo ante.

## **New lines of confrontation or a new multilateralism?**

This raises the question of whether, in lieu of greater trilateral cooperation between Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi, we may see the emergence of new strategic alignments and growing rivalry: on one side, the Sino-Russian “authoritarian entente” or “quasi-alliance”, on the other the United States, backed by a more assertive India and re-energized Japan. The key variable here is the Sino-American relationship, and whether this veers toward growing confrontation on a number of fronts, starting with the western Pacific, and extending to other geographical areas, including the Indian Ocean.

Until now, neither Washington nor Beijing have shown much appetite for a confrontation that could ruin them both—economically in the case of the United States, and existentially in the case of China. Beijing reacted angrily to the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s (PCA) rejection of its claims to the “nine-dash line” covering most of the South China Sea, but has otherwise sought to defuse regional tensions by reaching out to the other disputant parties.<sup>60</sup> For its part, following the judgment in The Hague

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60. In this, Beijing has been assisted by the anti-Americanism of Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte, see T. Phillips and O. Holmes, “China Courts Philippines Leader Duterte Amid Signs of US Rift”, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2016, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

the Obama administration became somewhat less high-profile in promoting “freedom of navigation” in the region.

However, recent actions and statements by President Trump could transform what has admittedly been an often uncomfortable interaction into one of open hostility. Already, the suggestion that Washington may adopt a more pro-Taiwan stance, in addition to tariff measures aimed at Chinese imports, has had a destabilizing effect on the US-China relationship. What makes the situation more complicated still is that Trump is also attempting to reach out to Moscow, implicitly challenging one of the principal drivers of the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership”—counterbalancing a “hegemonic” United States. The geopolitical picture is further muddied by uncertainties over the extent of his commitment to the “global partnership” with India. Will this fall victim to a reversal of Obama’s “rebalance” strategy toward Asia, or will Trump look to New Delhi—and Tokyo—to support American efforts to challenge China more openly and directly?

There is no way of knowing at this stage. Trump’s mercurial temperament—and profound ignorance of foreign policy—makes predictions of future US actions foolhardy. Paradoxically, though, the very presence of such uncertainties may be conducive to a certain continuity in the policies of *other* major players. In an international context where nothing can be taken for granted, the rational response is to hedge one’s bets: maintaining strategic flexibility and avoiding overly committal moves.

Revealingly, Beijing’s response thus far to Trump’s provocations has been quite restrained, awaiting developments rather than over-reacting to the clamor from Washington. In similar spirit, it has eschewed harsh responses to the US-India rapprochement, and avoided public criticism of Putin’s efforts to get closer to Tokyo and Hanoi. This calm approach recognizes two realities. First, China has little need to force the issue, since immediate circumstances and long-term trends alike favor its primacy in the region. Second, crude attempts to bend other major players, such as Russia and India, to its will would be fruitless at best and almost certainly counter-productive.

Strategic caution is likewise apparent in the case of India. It is highly unlikely that New Delhi will abandon its position of formal neutrality, to which successive administrations have adhered through the seven decades since independence. It is one thing for Modi to embrace partnership with Washington, quite another to make an enormous break with history by entering into a formal alliance. Such a course would radically increase the risk of confrontation with Beijing, both directly (over the disputed area of Arunachal Pradesh) and indirectly (via the medium of Pakistan). Given the

obvious disparity of power between China and India, and the growing importance of their economic ties, New Delhi would be loath to participate in any US-led strategy of hard containment. The logic of India's history and strategic circumstances suggests instead that it will remain true to its multilateralist traditions, even while it leans toward Washington.<sup>61</sup>

Continuity may also define Russia's approach. With the sharp deterioration of relations with the West in recent years, the Kremlin has naturally emphasized Sino-Russian strategic convergence. Yet Putin has been careful not to over-commit toward Beijing. Although Russian policy in Asia is strongly Sinocentric, Moscow has attempted to reach out to other Asian players, such as Japan, South Korea, and the ASEANs, as well as India. Putin's visit to Tokyo in December 2016 reflected a long-standing desire to pursue a more geographically diverse, and less China-dependent, Asia policy.

Equally, he has sought to reestablish functional relations with key European players. Recent developments in France and Germany have encouraged some modest optimism on this score. The possibility of a sympathetically disposed French president and a weakened Angela Merkel, not to mention a supportive US president, suggests that Western sanctions against Russia may not be long for this world. And while Kremlin efforts to re-engage with the West could yet end in failure, the underlying point remains: Putin aims to situate Russia as the middle power—or “pole”—balancing between the United States and China, and connecting Europe and Asia. Aligning too closely with Beijing would be inconsistent with this vision, and risk subordinating Russian interests to a Chinese agenda.

In conditions, then, where neither Russia, China, nor India have an interest in a major strategic realignment, broad continuity is as plausible a scenario as any. The three leading non-Western powers will engage with each other in a range of formats—bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral—but will do so with varying degrees of conviction and commitment. The Sino-Russian partnership will remain much the most important and influential. Sino-Indian engagement will continue to be characterized by the separation of economic cooperation from political and security affairs. And the Russia-India relationship will preserve key elements of cooperation, but most likely decline in relative importance. All sides will involve themselves in the growing number of sub-regional, regional, and global structures, but bilateralism will remain the principal medium of engagement with each other.

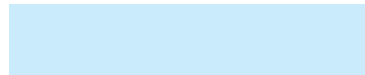
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61. S. Joshi, “A Survey of India's Strategic Environment”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2016, <https://shashankjoshi.files.wordpress.com>, p. 243.

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