



Commentary

Russian and Indian Approaches to BRICS and Global Governance

BY RACHEL S. SALZMAN

KENNAN INSTITUTE

Are we witnessing seismic shifts in the Russia-India-China triangle? It would seem so—but the shifts are long in the making.

Historically, Indo-Russian relations have been far stronger than Sino-Russian relations. In recent years, however, and especially since the onset of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, the dynamics of this “strategic triangle,” as former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov called it, have changed. Despite a shared history of strong bilateral relations and overlapping multilateral memberships, India and Russia are drifting apart. The flurry of agreements signed in October 2016 notwithstanding, defense ties are weakening, and economic relations have failed to meet targets.

More important, each country now worries about the other’s relationship with its main strategic competitor—India is anxious about tight Russo-China relations, and Russia is concerned about the recent uptick in Indo-U.S. relations. Indeed, despite a good working relationship between Russian president Vladimir Putin and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, relations between Russia and India have been deprioritized in both capitals. While this deprioritization has significance on multiple levels, the concern here is the implications of weaker bilateral ties for Indo-Russian cooperation toward reforming the global order.

Since 2006, the main locus of Russo-Indian cooperation toward reforming global order has been the BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and (since 2011) South Africa. The BRICS group of nations has been most active in the area of global economic governance, but it boasts a sprawling set of working groups and a stated aim of entirely reforming the global order. For Russia, India and China are the most important partners in the group, and their importance grows directly out of Primakov’s strategic triangle.

Cooperation in the BRICS has always been circumscribed by profound differences among its members. These include not only different positions in discrete international institutions that dictate different approaches but also variance in larger strategic goals. For Russia, BRICS has always been about politics, and has in many ways been a prime tool in Russian

efforts—both rhetorical and otherwise—to balance against U.S. hegemony in the global system. India, while certainly in possession of a strong strain of anti-Westernism in its own foreign policy, has nevertheless viewed BRICS primarily in terms of geoeconomics and India's ongoing efforts to increase its voice in prime organs of global governance. Countering U.S. supremacy as such is, for India, a useful side benefit of BRICS rather than the group's main purpose.

But these differences and misalignments did not prevent India and Russia from cooperating within BRICS to act as a forceful lobbying subgroup of the G20 during the acute phase of the 2008 global financial crisis. They also did not block BRICS' agreement to open its own development bank and a currency pool in 2014. Indeed, the crosscutting and conflicting interests among all the members of the BRICS group are one reason its effective cooperation on some issues (narrow though that may be) is notable. Members' differing views on the global governance endgame should be understood as nothing new in considering the future of the BRICS project, or in considering the value Russia and India each see in the group.

What has changed is the calculus Russia and India each bring to their interactions within the BRICS. The issue on both counts is China, and more specifically how Sino-Russian and Sino-Indian relations have an impact on coordination among the BRICS group of countries. The major turning point was 2014, the year that marked the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, and Modi's election in India. These watershed moments led to dramatic changes in U.S.-Russian and U.S.-Indian relations and changed priorities within the Russia-India-China trilateral grouping.

The crisis in Ukraine and its effect on relations with the Euro-Atlantic community (especially U.S.-Russian relations) left Russia with few strategic options beyond turning to China. While the Kremlin had been attempting to build political and economic ties with China for over a decade, it was only after 2014 that these efforts began to translate into not only somewhat stronger economic links but a strategic reorientation as well. The Sino-Russian relationship is neither uncomplicated nor unlimited in possibility, but it serves both countries' strategic interests to deepen cooperation and coordinate positions on some global issues. While Russia's longstanding concerns about Chinese dominance in their shared neighborhood, Chinese influence in the Russian Far East, and the imbalances in the makeup of bilateral trade have not disappeared, they have eased or been overtaken by more pressing concerns.[1] Further, close relations with India would in no way address any of those problems.

Indian foreign policy has also made notable shifts since 2014, but in the opposite direction. Since the Modi government came to power, relations

between India and China have been on a downward trend, while relations with the United States have reached almost unprecedented levels of cooperation. In a recent article in *International Affairs*, Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi attribute the uptick to Modi's emphasis on economic development and the concordant need for advanced technology and foreign investment, Modi's strong domestic support, and changes to India's structural environment, particularly reflecting concerns about a more aggressive China. Strong relations with Russia have historically been a hedge against the third concern, and steady defense ties—including the import of some of Russia's most advanced weapons—have somewhat addressed the first issue. In a world where Russia is increasingly close to China (including selling China advanced weapons systems), however, India can no longer be sure that Russia is solidly in its corner.

These issues have implications for how both Russia and India approach their membership in BRICS.

For Russia, BRICS continues to be a useful vehicle for challenging American dominance in the global system. It also provides valuable optics of partnership in the face of Western efforts to isolate the country during the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. China is the most important piece of that challenge, however, and with strong Sino-Russian relations assured for the near term, Russia may find it less useful to invest in BRICS. Russia is also shifting focus to its project to build a "Greater Eurasia," (also known as the Eurasian Comprehensive Partnership).

For India, BRICS continues to be a useful lobbying group for making global governance more representative, but strong Sino-Russian relations make it less certain that India's voice will be heard as clearly during intragroup discussions. Further, to the extent that one motivation for Indian participation in BRICS is embedding China into a multilateral grouping in hopes that this exerts some influence on Chinese behavior, that bet seems much less sure without Russia pushing for the same objective. This compounds Indian frustration that, with proposals such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank and One Belt One Road, China is already acting outside the BRICS framework and violating core BRICS principles. (Some in China, however, feel the opposite, and worry that Indo-Russian synchrony complicates Chinese objectives in BRICS.)

During his opening address to the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi in January 2017, Prime Minister Modi called Russia "an abiding friend." This is true: Russia remains one of two countries with which India holds an annual, institutionalized summit, and both countries rhetorically endorse the importance of the relationship. Below the surface, however, changes in priorities in both countries have upended the balance in the Russia-India-China triangle and put Russia's growing partnership with China at odds with the increasingly close Indo-American relations. Indeed, the

fundamental problem plaguing Russo-Indian relations is that each country has more to gain from close relations with the other's strategic adversary than with its own longstanding partner.

[1] Russia exports primarily raw materials to China and imported primarily finished manufactured goods. The main exception is arms sales.