

ISSN: 2456-9550

JMC

December 2022

**RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO MULTILATERALISM
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RUSSIA-
INDIA-CHINA (RIC) GROUPING**

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Volume 6, 2022

THE JMC REVIEW

*An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism,
Practice and Theory*

<http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/>

JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

NEW DELHI-110021

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO MULTILATERALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RUSSIA-INDIA-CHINA (RIC) GROUPING

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Abstract

Traditionally, the concept of multilateralism as coalitions of States gained fame in the West in the backdrop of intense Cold War contestations. However, in the period following the end of the Cold War, Russia's attempts at integrating itself into the multilateral structures led by the West failed to yield any momentous results and its cooperation with them remained uneven at its best. Eventually this led the Russian academic community and its policy makers to differentiate between 'true multilateralism' and 'collective unilateralism'. Drawing on Alexander M. Gorchakov's legacy, Russia's former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, in the late 1990s began to assert that Russia should actively engage in pursuing a multifaceted foreign policy instead of withdrawing from the international arena due to its economic weaknesses. His contention was that Russia's position in the international arena would be alleviated if it forged constructive partnerships with China and India. This led to the floating of the idea of the Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping. Though in the initial years the idea of RIC never really took off despite numerous meetings, it has over time received a fresh impetus following the Kremlin's spirited assertion of its distinct civilisational identity in the backdrop of increasing estrangement between Russia and the West.

In this broader context, this paper will attempt (i) to delineate why and how the idea of global ontological pluralism has come to underpin Russia's understanding of 'multilateralism'- a term that has no direct translation in the Russian language (ii) to analyze how Russia's conceptualisation of multilateralism with its thrust on the foundational norms of sovereignty, equality, plurality, non-interference, inter-civilisational dialogue and multipolarity have contributed in providing an impetus to non-Western cooperative frameworks like the RIC grouping (iii) to see to what extent India and China's identity dilemma as experienced in the course of their difficult

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interaction with a world order based on dominant Western values have accentuated their own historical vulnerabilities in effect leading them to join Russia in institutionalising the RIC.

The paper will also attempt to rationalise how the RIC has received renewed attention in the backdrop of Russia's assertion of its distinct civilizational identity, placed through the Eurasianist philosophy. This will be done through an analysis of primary documents like Russia's *Foreign Policy Concepts* and *National Security Concepts* and the numerous *Joint Communiqués* between Russia and its traditional partners, China and India, along with the speeches of their leaders. Moreover, the paper will attempt to see how the RIC has been successful in rendering an ideational platform, through which an alternative idea of security has come to be propagated.

Keywords: Multilateralism, Russia-India-China Troika, Contested Multilateralism, Collective Unilateralism.

I. Introduction

The intensification of Russia's engagement with non-Western multilateral institutions and forums like the RIC, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has become pronounced in the last two decades. This is especially in the backdrop of Russia's deteriorating relations with the West. The contemporary Russian leadership's approach towards the concept of multilateralism has in numerous ways come to reflect the geopolitical thinking of Primakov. Drawing on Alexander M. Gorchakov's legacy, Primakov, in the late 1990s had asserted that the diversification of Russia's foreign policy with its thrust on the principle of great power balancing would help alleviate Russia's position in the international arena. At the core of Primakov's vision, was placed '...pursuance of rational pragmatism devoid of romanticism and unaffordable sentimentality' (Rubinstein 2000: 19) through which he believed Russia could reclaim its great power status. He urged that this objective would be more easily achievable if Russia would forge constructive partnerships with China and India. Primakov believed that the shift in Russia's foreign policy orientation towards these countries would play out in Moscow's interest in moving away from a West dominated unipolar world order towards a multipolar world order. This would give Russia the opportunity to assume the

role of a key pole, and in effect have greater control over the Eurasian geopolitical space. Drawing heavily from Primakov's long-standing vision of strengthening the Asian vector of Russia's foreign policy, President Putin, dissatisfied with the West's continuous systemic attempts to push Russia to the periphery, has vehemently criticised the West for its failure to establish universally acceptable institutions. In a bid to thwart the attempts of the West to impose its set of norms and rules on the international system, Russia has been rallying support in favour of the traditional repertoire of international law for which it has strongly endorsed non-Western forums like the RIC. According to Tsygankov (2016), President Putin has aimed to propagate a non-West worldview through forums/institutions like the RIC, BRICS and SCO which besides promoting the traditional norms of international law like sovereignty, equality of states, non-intervention and multilateralism have also helped Russia in building its influence in Eurasia. In the process it has also strengthened its relations particularly with China and India. Donaldson (2014) notes that China and India, despite their bilateral tensions, have accompanied Russia in the regular meetings of these organizations to insist on the multipolarisation of global politics, for they, like Russia, have exhibited interest in establishing an international order which is based on the principles of territorial and governmental sovereignty, equality, plurality, multipolarity and multilateralism.

On a superficial note, it may appear that there is an inherent asymmetry that seems to thwart cooperation amongst Russia, China and India given these countries' different developmental traditions and socio-political systems. Yet as Ranganathan (2002:43) argues, despite these obvious asymmetries, the fact that these countries are large 'continental-sized entities' and are 'civilisation states' has led them to share complimentary viewpoints. These complimentary viewpoints should be looked at in the backdrop of what Yakovlev (2002:1010) terms as the 'political structuring of the world' and the aggravating rivalry surrounding the question of how the world-order should be conceptualised. For Myasnikov (2003), the formation of a conducive international environment has become a necessity for the successful implementation of reforms in all the three countries. This necessity has eventually led these countries to recognise the fact that '...strategies of their development and their behavior in the international arena are not at loggerheads with each other, rather it is in their interest to create a real possibility of cooperation in an effort to graft those strategies

into the newly-emerging system of international relations' (Myasnikov 2003:355). The aim of these countries, in the words of Bagchi (2007:139) is to '...break out of the "backward" state of their respective countries as a major goal of their movements, their strategies and their policies'. The state of backwardness in all the three countries has been perceived in relation to the 'advanced' Western countries. He writes that all the three countries have come to recognise themselves as homes to human beings with complicated histories and this recognition has led them to cooperate through multilateral frameworks like the RIC. This is also in a bid to protect their land and people from the forces of evil which in their view have manifested in the shape of market fundamentalism and super-hegemonic imperialism.

Russia, on its part has been proactive about its multilateral engagements with China and India as the Russian leadership considers these countries to be Russia's 'traditional partners'. Russia's State documents, bilateral declarations with China and India as well as the annual meetings of the RIC have reflected Russia's growing interest in pushing the Troika (Russia-India-China) to assume the role of establishing 'a self-regulating international system' which is 'representative in geographical and civilizational terms' (President of Russia 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). Time and again, Russia has committed to make itself more occupied in non-Western multilateral formats in order to '...develop the mechanism of effective and mutually beneficial cooperation in foreign policy and economy between Russia, India and China' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013) as all the three countries share the collective worldview of a multipolar world order. In the context of India's role in the RIC, many scholars have doubted the success of such an arrangement given India's closeness towards the U.S. and its tensions with China. However, as Ranganathan (2002) notes, the larger objectives of India's foreign policy which constitute the safeguarding of its sovereignty, enhancing its geostrategic space, protecting its decision-making autonomy, strengthening its role as a significant actor in maintaining peace and stability in Asia by defeating terrorism has above all shown exemplary complementarity with the annual declarations of the RIC.

II. Understanding Russia's Approach to Multilateralism and its Support for Non-Western Multilateral Organisations

Multilateralism, broadly understood as coalitions among States, in the traditional sense, emerged in the West during the course of the Cold War with the establishment of organisations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, given the contemporary changes in the international system in general and in Russia's equation with the West in particular, the meaning and scope of traditional/transatlantic multilateralism has come to be contested. Russia's exclusion from the West-led institutions has led to deep suspicions of the kind of multilateralism that the West professes. Russia's apprehensions further solidified in the backdrop of the crisis in Kosovo (1999) followed by the US led NATO's interventions in Yugoslavia (1999); Afghanistan (2002); Iraq (2003) and the color revolutions in the former Soviet countries. Thus, looking at the USA led NATO's actions in these crises, a differentiation between 'true' multilateralism and 'collective unilateralism' has been made by Russian policy makers. This has eventually led Russia to understand the meaning of multilateralism in a different way as compared to how the idea was conceptualised by the West. Experts on Russia have mostly maintained that Russia's uniqueness cannot be capably accounted for by Western/mainstream International Relations (IR) theory. This has eventually led the Russian academic community to develop a specifically Russian IR theory and this new concept of multilateralism has been placed at the core of that social theory. Makarychev and Morozov (2013) write that the tendency in Russian IR to lay emphasis on its own concepts of multilateralism and multipolarity has been precisely for two important reasons. First, the Russian academic community aims for a concept of IR as a discipline that is pluralistic which has led them to look for alternative theories and champion alternative understanding of global governance in a bid to account for this plurality. Second, the non-Western identity narrative of Russia as a great Eurasian power has come to emphasize on the idea of global ontological pluralism which Russia believes can be achieved through the concepts of multilateralism and multipolarity. These concepts have come to be welcomed as alternatives to U.S. unilateralism and Western dominance. Further, Stronski and Sokolsky (2020) note that the English word 'multilateralism' does not have a precise Russian

translation. For the West, the term multilateralism generally means sacrificing the privileges of State sovereignty for the common good of the international system and multilateral institutions means those primary vehicles through which international law and norms are enforced. But for the Russian academic community, it means that those very institutions are dominated by the West, echoing Western values and interests eventually sidelining Russia. It is for this reason that the Russian approach to multilateral engagement has come to be shaped by the desire to utilise multilateral mechanisms to bolster Russian sovereignty and assert its great power identity. Hence, the Russian leadership has come to support those multilateral institutions which uphold the principles of equality; in which member States pledge not to impinge on each other's sovereignty nor bind each other in ways that are inimical to their individual interests. Therefore, as Makarychev and Morozov (2011:355) puts it, multilateralism for the Russian leadership, '...depends on the complex identity dynamics between Russia and the West as well as on the interplay between multipolarity and multilateralism as conceptual tools.'

Russia's approach towards the concept of multilateralism and its support for non-Western organisations can also be understood within the framework of 'contested multilateralism' given by Morse and Keohane. They write that 'contested multilateralism' is a product that results from the plan of action of States, non-State actors as well as multilateral organisations to challenge the existing rules, practices and goals of multilateral institutions.

Morse and Keohane (2014) notes that 'contested multilateralism' takes shape when dissenting countries use the combined threats of exit, and voice the creation of alternative institutions to push for policies and practices that are distinct from those of the existing institutions. States engaged in 'contested multilateralism' are usually dissatisfied with the existing institutions and this dissatisfaction in Morse and Keohane's views emerges from exogenous reasons. Thus, in the contemporary political scenario, characterised by the increasing dispersal of resources to the East from the West, the concept of 'contested multilateralism' becomes particularly pertinent. Russia's dissatisfaction with the Western institutions due to their policy of excluding Russia from the security architecture in the region coupled with Asian countries like China and India's objectives of siding with Russia to

challenge the status-quo in favor of a 'true' multilateralism as reflected from the rise of the RIC, SCO and BRICS, can be taken to be examples of 'contested multilateralism'.

In the broader context of Russia's foreign policy, the first personality to introduce and articulate the concept of multilateralism was Primakov. He held that the Asian dimension of Russia's foreign policy needed to be strengthened if Russia desired to build its power base in the international system. Leichtova (2014:122) writes that Primakov sought to create out of Russia and China '...two support points of a wider geopolitical project, dubbed as the strategic triangle...the third point of this triangle was to become India.' Primakov's aim was to win strong allies for Russia that would help Moscow to rebuild its position as a global power in the international system. This would allow Russia to balance the overpowering influence of the United States and also help Russia in maintaining its influence in the 'near abroad' through related institutions. Primakov's longstanding vision of a pragmatic, multi-vector and de-ideologised foreign policy approach continued under the leadership of President Putin with the concept of 'multilateralism' coming to constitute the core of Russia's foreign policy orientation. This is evident from the state policy documents including the *National Security Concept* (2000) followed by the *Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation* (2008; 2013; 2016; 2023).

In the *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation* (2000), the call to strengthen multilateral governance of international processes was laid down categorically. In the words of the Security Concept, the Russian Federation aimed at '...pursuing a vigorous foreign policy course' and 'strengthening the key mechanisms of multilateral governance of world political and economic processes...' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2000). The call for multilateralism became more pronounced in the *Foreign Policy Concepts* (2008; 2013 and 2016). In the *Foreign Policy Concept of 2008*, it was stated that in order to safeguard its national interests, it was imperative for Russia '...to establish, a system of bilateral and multilateral partnerships aimed to ensure stability of the international position of the country in the face of international foreign policy volatility'. It further stated that Russia would '...continue to seek the strengthening of principles of multilateralism in international affairs, development of an architecture of international relations that would be based on the

recognition by the international community of the principles of security indivisibility in the modern world and would reflect its diversity’ (President of Russia 2008). Similarly, in the *Foreign Policy Concepts of 2013 and 2016*, the emphasis on multilateralism continued with the Concepts stating that it is in the national interest of Russia to develop and promote ‘...within multilateral frameworks, mutually beneficial and equal partnerships with foreign countries guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, predictability, a multidirectional approach and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis (and) on a non-discriminatory basis’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). This was highlighted in the more recent *Foreign Policy Concept* which was signed by the Russian President in March 2023 in the backdrop of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the deterioration of Russia’s ties with the West following it. It highlighted the concept of multilateralism as being threatened by the wide-spread form of interference in the internal affairs of sovereign States due to ‘...the imposition of destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes that run counter to traditional spiritual and moral values’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation 2023). The *Concept* further underlined the ‘...serious pressure being put on the UN and other multilateral institutions the intended purpose of which, as platforms for harmonising the interests of the leading powers, is artificially devalued’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023). It specifically laid out Russia’s interests in fighting the ‘...imposition of rules, standards and norms that have been developed without equitable participation of all interested states’ while ‘enhancing the capacity and international role of the interstate association of BRICS, the SCO, CIS, the EAEU, the CSTO and the RIC’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023).

Besides the foreign policy concepts, the Russian leadership in various declarations and speeches including the ones before the UN General Assembly has consistently emphasized on ‘...strengthening the multilateral framework of international relations and world economy based on the universal norms of international law, above all on the UN Charter, with an emphasis on the unconditional respect for the sovereignty of States and the inadmissibility of interference in their internal affairs’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2020) by preventing the Western States from replacing ‘the universally recognized

international legal principles with “the so-called rules based world order” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021). Leichtova (2014) argues that by stressing on multilateralism, Putin’s strategy has been to search for strong partners like China and India, who can support Russia in the international forum, in effect making it difficult for the West to ignore or to leave Russia on the side-lines while at the same time warranting Russia to assert its great power identity in the international arena. Second, Putin’s aim has been to address and ally with those countries which do not have many influential allies in the international system like Iran, Venezuela, Syria, in effect projecting Russia as a legitimate party in negotiating in the majority of crises involving these countries. This has also enabled Russia to rally support from these countries for the traditional repertoire of international law in effect presenting itself as the true defender of the norms and principles of international law which above all constitute the principle of ‘equal rights’, ‘mutual respect’ and ‘non-interference in domestic affairs of states’ so as to guarantee equal security for all member states of the global community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). By harping on the preservation of these norms, Russia under President Putin has attempted to project its distinct civilisational uniqueness that sets it apart from the West. This uniqueness, as Sakwa (2017:216) argues has been based on Russia’s ideology of a ‘special path’, one that has come to be founded along the lines of ‘spiritual renewal’ and ‘civilizational values’ that Russia believes had once been the foundation of the ‘true West’ but now no longer characterizes the West but has rather moved to the East. This has in effect necessitated Russia to ally with Asian countries like China and India in order to uphold and defend those values through key non-Western frameworks like that of the RIC.

III. Evolution and Objectives of the RIC Grouping: Tracing its Relevance in the Contemporary Global Order

The foreign policy of Russia in the late 1990s was characterized by the emergence of an assertive approach to diplomacy, at the core of which was the aim of strengthening the country’s Asian dimension. The alternative understanding of the identity of Russia as a State

and a civilization belonging not to Europe but to Eurasia was emphasized by Russia's political leadership. Naturally, the transformation characterising Russia's foreign policy orientation with its emphasis on the Asian dimension, coincided with the Russian leaderships' call for the development of a 'mechanism of dialogue' between Russia-India-China (Lei 2008:400). Among a multitude of factors leading to the creation of the Russia-India-China (RIC) format was Russia's growing economic vulnerability coupled with the West's consistent attempts to perceive the world from the Cold-War perspective. This led Primakov to envision the RIC as a safeguard for protecting the free-minded nations, who were unwilling to ally with the West (Simha 2015). Though in the initial years the idea of RIC never really took off despite occasional meetings, by the early 2000's the idea started gaining momentum with President Putin's declaration during his state visits to Beijing and New Delhi in 2002, that 'Russia, China and India shall join their efforts in protecting the common interests of Asia' (Lei 2008:400). Since then the foreign ministers of the RIC framework have met annually to discuss international issues of prominence. Though at the first RIC Summit in 2006, the members noted their shared preference to continue engagements with each other, the idea of subsequent summits was not endorsed. It was only in 2018 after a twelve-year hiatus, that the first meeting comprising heads of governments of the three countries was held. During the meeting the leaders agreed to hold regular annual summits and jointly promote the principles and norms of international law in a bid to create a fair and multipolar world order (MFA Russia 2020). Subsequently, in the RIC Foreign Ministers' meeting in 2020, the countries also decided to initiate a parallel RIC Defence Ministers' dialogue that would lead to a more institutional deepening of the trilateral framework. O'Donnell and Papa (2021:803) observes that the initiative to deepen the RIC framework received favorable support from India due to its foreign policy preferences towards 'hedging' and engaging in 'soft balancing' through informal alignments, international institutions and economic measures to impel adversaries. Also, India had probably realized the lack of success in advancing its counter-terrorism agenda through the multilateral mechanisms of BRICS and SCO. Thereafter in a bid to utilize RIC as a suitable platform for presenting and addressing its concerns related to counter-terrorism India began to reactivate its participation in the RIC, especially since 2018.

Besides the ministerial meetings, several initiatives have been taken by the three countries to come up with newer mechanisms for strengthening coordination on regional and international issues of importance. Establishment of consultants from various foreign policy agencies and instituting academic forums consisting of young diplomats from these countries are two of the initiatives taken to deepen and widen cooperation. For instance, an understanding was reached among the Foreign Ministers of the three countries in Moscow in 2016 under the RIC Joint Communique to facilitate exchange of young diplomats from the RIC countries. Since then, these exchanges have become an institutionalized part of the broader RIC framework. Recognizing its significance, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister while chairing the opening ceremony of the Third Meeting of the Young Diplomats of RIC in 2019, remarked that these meetings have become a major factor of cooperation in the trilateral format (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2019a). Besides the exchange of young diplomats, these countries have also facilitated the meeting of academic experts to identify areas of trilateral cooperation. In the annual report of these meetings as published in the *China Report*, the role of diplomats, academicians and the business community has been acknowledged for their collaborative efforts in the success of the RIC. Besides the academicians, the diplomats of the RIC framework, through their regular contacts, have immensely contributed in fostering consensus on significant issues like terrorism, nuclear proliferation, radicalism, etc. while upholding the shared worldview of a multipolar world order. Moreover, as Lei (2008) remarks, the multitude of international academic conferences have aided in bringing onto the surface the various issues that require trilateral cooperation.

With regard to the agenda of this trilateral framework, the first and foremost objective has been to propagate ‘the idea of a new concept of security’. Lei (2008) notes that the alternative idea of security, based on the collective repudiation of the Western hegemony has come to form the foundation of the trilateral engagement. Repudiating the West for imposing its values and norms on all countries, the RIC has undertaken to establish and maintain ‘mutual-trust’, ‘mutual beneficial’ and ‘cooperative relationship’, which emphasizes on a ‘win-win strategy’, ‘positive-sum game’, ‘constructive dialogue’ and ‘multilateralism in foreign policies’ (Lei 2008:402). These countries have advocated the central and coordinating role of the UN in maintaining global security and stability and have been vocal about any form of

unilateralism. The aim has been, in the words of Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov to '...promote a positive, unifying international agenda focused on ensuring global and regional security and stability, attaining sustainable development goals and improving the architecture of international relations' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2019b). Thus, as the concept of a fair and democratic world order has come to occupy center stage in this trilateral arrangement, these countries have decided to adopt a collective resolution for regional and international problems. The experience of these countries with US unilateralism has convinced them that multilateral diplomacy is the only viable option for regulating the course of international relations, both at the global and regional level(s) (Titarenko 2008). Such an understanding has invariably led these countries to uphold the UN as the universal forum having a unique legitimacy that necessitates all States to have unswerving compliance to its Charter. Moreover, the demand for the creation of a fair and democratic world order by the RIC has also translated into the central issue of reforming the West-led structures and institutions like the G-8 so that they become more representative in structure and intent. RIC's commitment to upholding the UN Charter and international law has further led it to advance its views on the settlement of major regional and international crises in accordance with the principles and norms of international law. These countries have called for the abandonment of force in favor of negotiations and network diplomacy on major crises including the ones in Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and Korea. For instance, in the meeting of the RIC foreign ministers in 2020, the discussions focused on the topical issues of international and regional importance, declaring to tackle them in the spirit of mutual understanding, friendship and trust (Ministry of External Affairs 2020). Furthermore, these countries have also come to pursue a shared policy with regard to some of the major challenges confronting the international system at large like regional extremism, terrorism, separatism, and human trafficking. These have been addressed more vigorously through the multilateral mechanisms of the SCO. The countries have also recognized the need to work collectively on disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and environmental issues. Purushottam (2018) notes that as climate change has come to have an impact on the opening up of the Northern Sea Route, the RIC has been confronted with the opportunity to formulate rules regarding the governing of the Arctic route. Such an opportunity can specially ensure that countries like China and India can make a transition from the role of rule followers to rule makers.

Besides the areas encompassing the strategic and security realms, another area in which these countries have bonded is in the sphere of economic cooperation. Lei (2008:403) notes that Russia being a major power exporter in the world, has had major confrontations with the West on issues of energy and security but with China and India having a large consumer market, Russia has been able to easily direct its energy towards these markets. Thus, their ‘worldview’ of creating a fair and democratic world order has also resonated in the economic realm with their collective demand of steering global economic growth by upholding and protecting the principles of fair competition in world trade and finance. With a combined GDP that constitutes 33 percent of the global GDP, these countries are aware of their potential for creating a new economic structure for the world. This further led them to embark on the journey towards de-dollarisation; an objective that has been more vehemently pushed through the BRICS.

IV. Russia-India-China Trilateral Cooperation: Prospects and Problems

From the theoretical plane to the practical field, the trilateral cooperation among Russia-India-China has been elevated in levels within a brief time span. However, scholars have listed out several challenges that can thwart the trilateral cooperation. Firstly, foremost among the challenges that have been listed out is the unpredictability characterizing the Sino-Indian bilateral relationship that can weaken the Russia-India-China trilateral cooperation. Pant (2006) writes that China’s rapid economic growth has over the time translated into its growing military capability and this has emerged as a cause of great concern for India. China has gradually adopted an assertive strategy in the Asia-Pacific and though its military capabilities are yet to match that of the U.S.A., it has surely emerged as a reckoning force in Asia, and has become a source of concern for India. Moreover, in contrast to border issues with other countries, China has adopted a cautious policy with respect to India. Sino-Indian border issues have not only failed to pick up the needed momentum, they have worsened in the backdrop of China’s economic diplomacy in the region through its Belt and Road initiative.

Secondly, scholars have remarked that the struggle for influence in the Central Asian region between Russia and China along with Russia's overt dependence on China in the backdrop of the former's deteriorating relations with West, can turn the Russia-China relationship into an imbalanced partnership which in effect can impact the trilateral cooperation. Also, China's economic diplomacy which is eventually aimed at controlling the Central Asian region, may not go down well with Russia which views the Central Asian states as the area of its 'privileged interest.' Some scholars have further opined that the underlying reason for Russia to develop robust ties with China lies in its interest in countering China's growing status as a countervailing power in the region.

The third challenge as enumerated by scholars is India's multi-alignment practice that has led India to participate in these organisations in order to enhance its own status and hedge against the major powers without being ambitious about attaining the objectives of these organisations. Such a policy objective, on the part of India has pushed it to develop closer ties with the U.S.A. while simultaneously being an active part of the trilateral framework. Writing on the concept of a strategic triangle, Pant (2006: 55) notes that in international politics, a strategic triangle refers to 'a triangular relationship among three States that can have a major impact on regional and/or global balance of power.' Borrowing from Harding's categorization, Pant mentions that a strategic triangle can take various forms. First, within the triangle, two out of the three States can decide to balance the third member State. Second, within the triangle, all three States can decide to cooperate with each other in order to balance a more adversarial power. Third, all the three States, in the attempt to become the predominant power within the triangle can work against each other. In the context of the Russia-China-India 'strategic triangle', most scholars have sought to analyze it in a way that resembles the second form of a strategic triangle, i.e., one in which all states cooperate to balance a more powerful adversary. However, some scholars like O'Donnell and Papa (2021) have pointed out that India's contemporary policy of multi-alignment is characterized by selective tilting towards certain powers while favoring looser arrangements over treaty-based institutionalization. This has led it to move closer to the U.S.A. while being an active partner in such multilateral frameworks which have been extremely critical of the U.S.A. Such a policy choice on the part of India, as Ranganathan (2002:46) notes, has come to be shaped by

the ‘historical’, ‘cultural’ and ‘philosophical roots’ of India’s foreign policy which has been based on the concept of non-alignment. This means that India has been historically averse to being a part of the calculus of relations between great powers, but has rather sought to engage with all great powers simultaneously without using any set of relationships to affect others’ interests. Thus, while a multidimensional policy has been in the best interest of India, it has led some scholars to opine that such an approach of extensively cooperating with the U.S.A., has in fact become a potent factor in pushing Russia closer to India’s adversary in the region, Pakistan. In their opinion, China too has played a notable role in bringing two of its strategic partners, Russia and Pakistan closer, in effect setting the pace for the creation of Russia-China-Pakistan strategic counter alliance, which aims at pushing for greater bipolarity in world affairs.

Despite the challenges that loom large before the Russia-China-India trilateral cooperation, it is important to mention that the multitude of declarations, meetings and people’s exchanges serve as evidence to the fact that interaction among the three countries has moved from the theoretical plane to the field of practical actions. These countries have decided to coordinate their approaches and foreign policies in order to achieve their common objectives and in doing so they, within the rubric of the RIC, have certainly posited themselves as an alternative pole in global governance.

V. Conclusion

The term ‘multilateralism’ with no direct translation in the Russian language has been conceptualised by the Russian leadership in a different way compared to their Western counterparts. As Russia’s position within the West-led structures remained peripheral, the Primakov doctrine (1998) with its emphasis on strengthening Russia’s relations with Asian countries like India and China gave rise to the idea of the RIC. The idea of strengthening the RIC came to acquire prominence only in the backdrop of Russia’s increasing hostility with the West following the latter’s unilateral tendencies in the face of major regional and international crises, that bypassed the institutional edifice of the U.N. and eroded the principles and norms on which the UN stood. Hence, as the complex identity dynamics

between Russia and the West have played out, multilateralism and multipolarity as conceptual tools have begun to gain prominence with their thrust on the idea of a global ontological pluralism. This has found expression in the formation of non-Western organizations like the RIC which seek to prioritize representation in geographical and civilizational terms.

United in their shared objective of pluralizing IR, these countries have come to challenge the traditional multilateral institutions and their norms and practices of reflecting Western hegemonism.

However, in view of their innate differences with regard to the nature of their historical development, polity, economy, geography, demography and level of urbanization, scholars have raised doubt on the credibility of the RIC grouping through which these countries aim to cooperate. Nevertheless, despite their differences, the recent developments have shown that the three countries have increasingly united in aligning their foreign policies with the aim of creating a fair and multipolar world order. Though it is too soon to evaluate the success or failure of the Russia-India-China trilateral cooperation, what is of significance is that notwithstanding the several challenges that confront them, these countries have managed to push their objectives from the theoretical plane to the plane of practical actions and policy formulations. Through the widening and deepening of cooperation among them, as is evident from the diverse areas of cooperation and institutionalization, these countries have managed to project a collective ‘worldview’ with respect to global governance; one that stands on the edifice of the principle(s) of sovereignty, equality of states, plurality, multipolarity and multilateralism.

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