

Thematic Report

The 17th Trilateral Conference of Russian, Indian and Chinese Scholars (RIC)

10-11 September, 2019
Conference Room Two (1st Floor), CIIS
Beijing, China



The 17th Trilateral Conference of Russian, Indian and Chinese Scholars was held at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Beijing on 10 – 11 September 2019. The Chinese

participants included Qi Zhenhong, President, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Rong Ying, Vice President, CIIS, Ma Jiali, Director, China Reform Forum, Ding Xiaoxing, Director, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, Wu Dahui, Director, China Association for International Friendly Contact, Cai Pengming Deputy Director China Association for International Friendly Contact, Wu Shan, Deputy Director China Association for International Friendly Contact, Li Ziguo, Acting Director Dept. for European-Central Asian Studies, CIIS Lan Jianxue, Deputy Director Dept. for Asian-Pacific Studies, CIIS, Han Lu, Deputy Director Dept. for European-Central Asian Studies, CIIS, Bai Lianlei, Associate Research Fellow Dept. for European-Central Asian Studies, CIIS, Jia Ding, Assistant Research Fellow CIIS, Zhang Jiaolong, Assistant Research Fellow, Dept. for International and Strategic Studies, CIIS, Cheng Shujing, Research Assistant CIIS and Wang Siyuan Research Assistant CIIS.

The Russian delegation was lead by Sergei Uianaev, First Deputy-Director, Institute of Far Eastern Studies (IFES) and the other participants included Anatoly Klimenko, Vice-Head, Center for Strategic Studies of Northeast Asia and the SCO, IFES, Alexandr Mokretskii, Senior Researcher, Center for Study & Forecast of Russia-China Relations, IFES and Vladimir Petrovskiy, Head Researcher, Center for Study & Forecast of Russia-China Relations, IFES. Officials from the Russian Embassy in China including Grigory Logvinov, Ambassador-at-Large Russia MFA, Maxim Novoselov, Senior Counselor, Russian Embassy in China, Slava Volodchenko, Second Secretary, Russian Embassy in China and Timur Chernyshov, Third Secretary, Russian Embassy in China were in attendance.

The Indian delegation lead by Ashok K. Kantha Director ICS, Former Ambassador of India to China also consisted of Ajai Malhotra, Distinguished Fellow & Senior Adviser, Former Ambassador of India to Russia, The Energy and Resources Institute, Alka Acharya, Honorary Fellow & former Director, ICS and Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Biswajit Dhar, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Veda Vaidyanathan, Research Associate ICS. Officials from the Indian embassy in Beijing including Acquino Vimal, Deputy Chief of Mission, Indian Embassy in China and Nikhil Vivekananda, Second Secretary, Indian Embassy in China were also present.

A few questions were thrown open by the head of the Indian delegation to be deliberated at the conference. These included: how do we collaborate on this transition to such an international order where the three countries recognise each other as co-equal poles, rather than seeking a hierarchy or harbouring doubts about each other's strategic intentions? As three major countries pursuing independent foreign policies, can we work together more meaningfully to shape the regional and global agenda on issues relating to security and development through trilateral initiatives? How do we explore synergies in our respective connectivity and developmental agendas while respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity, openness, equality and best practices? Can we go beyond consultations and identify specific and practical trilateral projects?

All delegations agreed that the 17th RIC academic trilateral is taking place at a time of great uncertainty in the international environment, amidst global challenges including unilateralism, and protectionism. They underlined the fact that the current geopolitical landscape is characterized by intensification of strategic contestation, worries linked to regional hotspots and terrorism, and sharpening arms race. The RIC countries in particular and the world at large are confronted with resurgent protectionism, rising tide of populism and anti-globalization tendencies. Recent developments related to US-China trade disputes are causing grave concern.

Significance of the RIC platform and cooperation and its challenges

The significance of the RIC academic trilateral within the auspices of RIC platform was underlined by participants of all three delegations. It provided an opportunity for the RIC countries to understand each other's perspectives better. Considering the contents of the Joint Statement that came out of Wuzhen, the RIC was an appropriate forum to discuss contentions. Although the scope for cooperation was immense, the RIC academic trilateral could provide ideas on practical cooperation. In depth exchange of views on various topics including WTO, terrorism, climate change etc, could potentially provide unique opportunities to work together. Moreover, RIC countries have the responsibility of safeguarding interests of developing countries and joint efforts were necessary to build a multilateral world order especially combating the shared challenge of terrorism. A Chinese delegate pointed out that although many

a times government officials and diplomats had to be cautious in speech, academics could be “aggressive” with ideas and the 17th RIC could provide the necessary platform to facilitate such a dialogue.

Speakers from all delegations stressed the fact that bilateral relations between RIC nations have historical roots and their relations today cuts across party lines and sectors. They pointed out that there has been considerable progress in the cooperation among the three countries, which are not only witness to global changes, but are also part of this change. The meeting of the heads of state on the margins of G20 at Buenos Aires on November 2018 and Osaka in June 2019 has raised the RIC dialogue to the highest levels. Participants agreed that with India and China being major consumers of energy and Russia one of their most important suppliers, the energy sector is a crux of this relationship. India -Russia relations also include import of Russian diamonds that are exported to the US, import of cooking coal, agrochemicals, farming, manpower exports and also cooperation in space including training Indian astronauts for Gaganyaan. However, it was also stressed that compared to China-Russia trade that amounts to 100 bn, India-Russia trade is much smaller averaging at 10-11 billion. While this portrayed the imbalance that existed, it was also an indicator of the extent of untapped potential.

However, there were contrarian views regarding the efficacy of the RIC platform. Chinese and Russian speakers pointed out that even after 17 RIC meetings, there are few concrete results to show and the ideas floated were largely dormant. They highlighted the fact that there were many agreements in place, but there was a need to translate them into reality. In the same vein, Indian delegates pointed out that the RIC needs to build a unique RIC identity. One way of ensuring this is taking on a large-scale joint project in a third country which could be carried out in partnership with local governments. There is a need to integrate ideas from both levels. It was pointed out that these suggestions are not new and were under discussion for over a decade now. “We have to refresh the RIC Academic Conferences’ history so that we can plan for the future.” While further projects could be envisioned in view of the changing dynamics, we need to also strive to implement the earlier ideas. With the framework of RIC, we need material guarantees. “Instead of symbolism, focus (of RIC) must be on substance”. One specific proposal was the introduction

of RIC fellowship for young leaders another was that the RIC could replicate “IBSA Funding mechanism”.

Expanding ambit of RIC Cooperation

Participants discussed the need to create a unique RIC identity. This identity could be forged with a high-profile project which leverages the strengths of each country and catches public imagination. For instance, Russia, India and China are leading nations in the critical area of peaceful applications of space. They also place great emphasis on technology and innovation as drivers of growth. The RIC nations could start a joint space or R&D/technology project which is sufficiently ambitious to change the narrative and public perceptions about the RIC as a grouping. Especially considering that assets in outer space are vulnerable and transparency arising out of exchange of information and assessments would build mutual confidence and benefit all three countries. Other areas where cooperation could be enhanced are cyber security, as the growing use of information and communication technologies for criminal purposes is a matter of common concern, preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and working together to combat climate change. The significance of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure that PM Modi was expected to launch at the United Nations Climate Summit on September 2019, was also identified as another avenue of cooperation.

Participants agreed that while the 17th RIC trilateral Academic Conference provided a space for scholars to understand each other’s stand, there was need to take that further and extend multi sector, multi-dimensional cooperation into newer areas. They also concurred that meeting of leaders and heads of state wasn’t enough and there was a need for RIC to expand the scope of collaborations, increasing practical cooperation aiming for more tangible benefits. While the existing nature of the cooperation includes meeting of state leaders on the sidelines of G20, cooperation in the security, financial sector, young diplomats meetings, arts festivals and joint efforts on cybercrime are encouraging, the scope could be widened. Promoting free flow between civil society organizations, scholars, researchers, young diplomats between RIC could add momentum to RIC cooperation with member states working together to benefit from the 4th Industrial Revolution, 5G, S&T revolution and find other opportunities for future growth.

Cooperation could extend to measures taken to control air pollution (Russian wood-processors for instance), renewable energy and new media. Practical cooperation between these countries could also extend to constructing pipelines, agricultural cooperation, GPS systems, and other varieties of new technology. regional development, including medicare, high tech, e-business were also identified as potential areas for cooperation. Suggestions were made to increase joint drills and exercises related to countering terrorism and also improving trust.

Improvement in bilateral relations among the three could further strengthen the trilateral cooperative potential. The RIC has not only brought stability but is a force that has been leading the reform of global governance where both bilateral and trilateral cooperation are mutually supportive. The role that the RIC countries play in the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan was also highlighted. It was also pointed out that there was a large spectrum of projects that were in place under China-Russia Relations and they could possibly be introduced into the RIC trilateral as well.

The conversations surrounding the idea of building an RIC identity, led to the idea of creating a vision for RIC. Towards this end, the Russian and Chinese delegation agreed that the ‘RIC vision’ of the international stage was critical, but it was also important to not let “other actors sabotage this relationship”. Participants argued that the focus of the RIC must remain on fostering harmony and cooperation without alliances. They emphasized the fact that “no one in the world can monopolize power and that the international order must remain collective and democratic where all actors respect the principles of international law.”

The RIC and the World Order

The RIC has a responsibility to the new emerging order and should play a stronger role in cultivating norms and building institutions. The world is getting divided, based on issues pertaining to security and the nature of threats are increasingly overlapping and fusing, becoming increasingly complex. There must be a renunciation of the use of force and resolution of disputes through peaceful processes and means. Issues traditionally considered soft have to also be taken up like tiger conservation, global heating, protecting biodiversity etc. RIC is also critical to

maintain stability in Eurasia, including preparing for hybrid warfare and new ways of confrontation including cyberattacks. Therefore, in the SCO/RIC framework we need to respond to such threats, identify sources and find solutions.

The participants agreed that the world is in transition and a new equilibrium is yet to emerge. However, the biggest challenges facing the world today are trans-national in character ranging from terrorism to pandemics to climate change. The nature of these challenges is such that they can be more amenable to resolution in a just, democratic and multipolar world. One of the other challenges facing RIC is the inherent imbalance between the relationships of three countries. Although Russia's relations with both India and China are strong, the China-India relationship needs to be stronger. Additionally, RIC relations need to move beyond a greater focus on the political and become more people-to-people oriented. Participants also alluded to the deterioration of multilateralism as a threat for all countries and the need to revisit the "original aspirations of RIC".

In the RIC framework, there is a serious commitment among the top three leaders to take this relationship forward. Trilateral & Bilateral Cooperation feed into each other, facilitate closer relations. The litmus test of judging bilateral relations is that RIC nations are mindful of each other's interests, concerns and take on board each other's aspirations and are supportive of each other's visions of their role in the world. India - Russia relations seem to be stable; strategic sectors, relationship is robust, but there is a need to reimagine, diversify this relationship. With regard to India - China relations, achievements are creditable and overall trends are positive; but concerns exist on both sides. Negativity on both sides is symptomatic of the fact that the countries are passing through a period of stress and strain. There is an accumulation of differences and outstanding issues including concerns in India about China's position on Kashmir, boundary question to trade deficit. There are also concerns about relations with third countries: China-Pakistan; India-US. The fact that there is huge investment by President Xi and Prime Minister Modi, taken charge with "hometown diplomacy" and "informal summits" provides considerable confidence. Indian concern on BRI, for instance, can be addressed by focusing on project specific initiatives. It was stated that among the RIC, India-China is the

weakest part of the relationship and there is hope that the next bilateral summit meeting would stress the view that China-India are not strategic threats to each other.

The US Factor

The Chinese and Russian participants frequently stressed that we are in an era of US dominance. According to them, the US not only hurt the WTO mechanism but destroyed international arms control policies, brought into force unilateral trade sanctions and is trying to change the three pillars of global governance structures, viz, the WTO, IMF & World Bank. “When people try to degrade organizations, they will try to eliminate common rules of international trade”. In this period of US dominance, the RIC countries have to coordinate efforts and work together to straighten multilateralism. It was also contented that while China and Russia had similar views on the US while India was more conservative in its opinion.

Assertions were also made that US strategies have, with time, become unfriendlier to all three countries with its national strategy doctrine prioritizing competition with other powers above countering terrorism. US policy towards India, according to some participants, has also undergone a significant shift, as it wants to use India to restrain Iran and bring its MNC’s into the Indian market. Sino-Russian cooperation was comprehensive and included deepening military ties, with 3000 Chinese soldiers joining the Russian military drill, naval exercises, cooperation in space and bilateral trade expected to exceed to \$100 billion. It was pointed out that the RIC countries were victims of terrorism and had to jointly fight against separatist and extremist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and illegal drug trafficking in Central Asia. The Russian delegates also stressed that China should reduce its cooperation with Pakistan and reduce military activity as all of it is targeted at India.

All participants agreed that multilateralism, as a concept, needs to be redefined to include cooperation with the three countries coordinating their policies. Of this, the Indo-Pacific strategy and the BRI are two initiatives where the stand of all RIC countries needs to be analyzed more carefully. China needs to clearly spell out the benefits of the BRI and address the transparency issues around it to decrease misunderstanding. As India’s point of view on the BRI is different

from that of China's or Russia's, there was a need to initiate further discussions to promote greater understanding. The Russian delegation backed the Chinese idea for a RIC Plus interaction and setting up a secretariat for the RIC grouping that will help coordinate issues. However, there was a difference in how the Indo-Pacific strategy was perceived by delegates from the RIC grouping. Delegates from Russia and China suggested that New Delhi could throw light on India's Indo-Pacific strategy and how it differed from US' idea of the same.

It was pointed out that external factors are also influencing these relationships; the behavior of the US for instance, has driven China closer to Russia. The effects of the trade war between the United States and China that began in the spring of 2018, are now clearly visible as both countries are facing headwinds. Growth of industrial production in China registered a 17-year low in July 2019, and retail sales grew at a rate much lower than expected. Some participants opined that in many ways, the economic uncertainties seen during the Great Depression in the 1930s were coming back to haunt the global economy. It was argued that if the present episode of trade protectionism continues in the way it has gone on, the impact would be felt worldwide as countries are more economically more integrated now than they have been at any point in human history. The RIC has stood by multilateralism as that this framework alone can ensure that the economic disparities between countries are effectively removed.

New emerging threats and issues

The areas where views of the RIC countries converge include: spread of international terrorism and extremist ideologies, scale of illicit drug production and its trafficking out of Afghanistan, transport connectives and economic corridors, especially the North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Energy. As Russia is one of the largest producers and exporters of oil and natural gas in the world, India and China are amongst its largest consumers and importers. Moreover, the Trilateral Economic Cooperation among RIC nations, this academic and scholars annual conference, business fora, experts meeting on disaster management etc must continue to be supported. Initiatives aimed at strengthening regional order should be based on principles of multilateralism, openness, inclusiveness and mutual respect and not directed against any country.

It was pointed out by an Indian delegate that one of the critical issues in the RIC grouping is the India-China trust deficit that arises from the Sino-Pakistan relationship and although China's stand was that this relationship is not aimed at India, but in India's strategic community it is not perceived as such". The RIC could be a platform to re-examine China- Pakistan, Russia-Pakistan relations as the heightened levels of tension has lead to an arms race in the sub-continent. It was also argued that China and India are not on the same page when it comes to political globalization and therefore it is vital that the strategic dialogue should be revived as there are solutions India and China can provide to issues to the international system. Other irritants in this relationship include lack of support to India's entry to the NSG and Chinese narrative after the close door summit at UNSC on Kashmir. RIC members need to speak out clearly about their own strategic targets.

The conference concluded with the proposal that the deliberations and the key ideas suggested at the 17th RIC will be summarized by the host CIIS and shared with the other delegations. The Russian delegation suggested setting up a joint working group to enhance pragmatic cooperation while the Chinese delegation suggested taking on a joint research project or publication, the findings of which could be shared at the next RIC Trilateral Scholars conference. The head of the Indian delegation, Amb. Ashok K. Kantha, also extended an invitation to the Russian and Chinese delegation to take part in the 18th RIC Trilateral to be held in New Delhi in the latter half of 2020. The heads of Russian and Chinese delegations accepted the invitation on behalf of their respective delegations and confirmed their participation at the 18th RIC Trilateral.