

Russia and the China-India Rivalry

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Conclusion

The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives outlined by China’s Russia expert community and officials since 2013–14 convey a certain degree of internal inconsistency, tension, and even contradictions reflecting their different understandings of and expectations for Sino–Russian relations. The rise and expansion of two such seemingly contradictory policy narratives indicate the contradictory tendency among Chinese policy makers, who are concerned about the uncertainty and vagueness underlying the relationship with Russia, but who are also simultaneously seeking to utilize such uncertainty to their advantage.

What the two policy narratives have in common, however, is that they portray Sino–Russian relations as operating on a level distinct, and higher than the “axis of convenience” or the “revisionist challenger to

liberal order” conceptualizations prevalent in Western expert discourse. The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives, at the very least, imply an intention to, and interest in, proactively constructing the relationship in a way that is not constrained by existing vocabularies and ideas in the mainstream policy space about Sino–Russian relations. It leaves room for “striving for more achievement” in the field of China–Russia relations, while still emphasizing the value of sticking to the “three-no” principles. No matter which policy narratives comes to be dominant in the official and expert policy communities in China, the Chinese–Russian bilateral relationship will be phrased and framed in a way that goes beyond their respective relationships to the US and the “liberal international order” debate that remains popular in the Anglophone world.

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ANALYSIS

Russia and the China–India Rivalry

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Abstract

The deadly Himalayan border clash between China and India in June 2020 and the ensuing breakdown of China–India relations posed a challenge for Russia’s foreign policy. Russia has consistently sought to balance its relations with China and India, while also encouraging cooperation among the members of the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle in seeking to increase their role in global governance. The deterioration of relations with the West has led Russia to strengthen relations with China, but Russia has also sought to avoid excessive reliance on China through diplomatic outreach to other countries, especially India. Tensions between China and India have long served to hinder Russia’s strategy, a problem that the events of 2020 compounded. In the face of growing concerns about China, India in recent years turned to the United States for support, becoming an active participant in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. This trend is accelerating following the border clash. Both Russia and India seek to maintain strong relations with one another, but the intensification of great-power rivalry in Asia is placing an increasing strain on this relationship, hindering Russia’s objectives related to the Russia–India–China triangle.

Russia’s recent “pivot to the East” has led primarily to close ties with China, even as the balance of power in the bilateral relationship continues to tilt rapidly in

China’s favor. In search of diversity in its foreign policy, Russia has sought to strengthen its relations with other Asian countries, especially India. Ideally, from Rus-

sia's standpoint, all three countries in the Russia–India–China triangle would enjoy friendly mutual relations while cooperating to raise their profile in global governance. At the same time, Russia's close relations with India would subtly balance China. The practical results of such triangular diplomacy, however, have consistently fallen short of Russia's expectations. Russia maintains strong relations with both countries, but China–India tensions have limited the triangle's effectiveness. The dramatic downturn in China–India relations during 2020, punctuated by a deadly clash along the two countries' Himalayan border, laid bare the limits of Russia's approach.

Russia and the Russia–India–China Triangle

Russia's conception of triangular diplomacy with China and India dates back to the late 1990s, when Yevgeny Primakov proposed a Russia–India–China strategic triangle. The proposal failed to gain traction, as China, India, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin all rejected it, but the idea lived on in Russian diplomatic thinking. The Russia–India–China (RIC) grouping obtained institutional form in 2002 with a meeting of the three countries' foreign ministers, an event held annually since then. In the years that followed, Russian President Vladimir Putin's growing disillusionment with the West led him to turn toward China and India.

In his infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, during which he sharply criticized U.S. unilateralism, Putin argued that the world was becoming multipolar, as demonstrated by the growing economic potential of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. These "BRIC" countries held their first summit in 2009, then added South Africa the following year to become BRICS. Around this same time, Russia began promoting India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional organization that China and Russia founded in 2001 to address Central Asian security, and in which India had gained observer status in 2005. The concrete achievements of Russia–India–China diplomacy in these institutional formats remained limited, but Putin saw them as a source of leverage in Russia's deteriorating relations with the West. In his view, these organizations offered a counterweight to a Western-centric international order. Although Russian officials refrained from saying so publicly, India's participation in these institutions also served to balance the relationship with China.

As U.S.–Russia relations soured following Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia announced its "pivot to the East," an effort that grew increasingly urgent following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and the imposition of Western sanctions. China soon became

the focus of the pivot, as demonstrated by a major natural gas deal and by the sale of advanced Russian weapons to China, most notably the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. In an effort to avoid excessive reliance on China, Russia also sought closer ties with other Asian countries, including India.

The friendship between Moscow and New Delhi dated back to the early days of the Cold War, and Russia continued to benefit from this relationship. India maintained a neutral position during the Ukraine crisis, refusing to join the international condemnation of Russia or follow the West in imposing sanctions. Similarly, India refrained from criticizing Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Russia continued to promote RIC and BRICS, and it secured China's agreement for India to become a full SCO member, provided that China's 'all-weather' ally Pakistan would become a member state simultaneously. The two South Asian rivals joined in 2017. At this point, Russia's ambitions for triangular diplomacy with China and India were far from fulfilled, but Russia had achieved some success in forming institutional arrangements that were conducive to its vision.

U.S.–China–India Triangle Poses Challenge for Russia

Standing as major obstacles to Russia's vision, however, were the China–India rivalry and the potential for increased strategic cooperation between India and the United States. China and India were both rising powers in Asia, setting the stage for rivalry. China enjoyed an advantage in power over India, which has contributed to Indian leaders' perceptions of China as representing a threat to its aims, but China also perceived a threat emanating from India's rise. Potential flashpoints existed both on land and at sea. Last summer's border clash served as a grim reminder that the border dispute, over which the two countries fought a war in 1962, remained unresolved. India was also concerned about China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and its alleged "string of pearls" strategy to build a regional network of ports that could eventually serve military purposes. China's support for India's main rival, Pakistan, was an ongoing source of tension and a major reason for India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor was an important component.

The intensifying China–India rivalry had the potential to draw India and the United States into close cooperation. India's preference was to maintain strategic independence and to avoid being drawn into the U.S.–China superpower rivalry, but signs of growing U.S.–India cooperation were clearly visible as early as 2005, when the two countries signed a civilian nuclear agreement. The issue came into sharp focus in 2017, when the Trump

administration adopted its Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and revived cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia in the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue, or the Quad, with the clear purpose of establishing a counterweight to China.

For Russia, these were adverse developments. India’s participation in this process threatened to aggravate its relations with China, undermining the Russia–India–China triangle. U.S.–India strategic cooperation could also lead India to drift away from Russia. In the worst case, from Russia’s standpoint, the Indo-Pacific Strategy could become an effort to contain not only China, but also Russia. After all, the Trump administration’s national security and defense strategies identified both China and Russia as threats, and the 2019 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report called Russia a “revitalized malign actor.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the Indo-Pacific Strategy during an appearance in Vietnam in February 2019 and on other occasions.

Despite its concerns about the new U.S. strategy, Russia subsequently achieved notable successes in relations with both China and India. Russia–China cooperation continued to intensify, as illustrated by China’s participation in Russia’s ‘Vostok-2018’ military exercise, diplomatic coordination on the North Korean nuclear crisis, and joint bomber patrols in Northeast Asia in 2019. At the same time, Russia made important advances in its relations with India. Russia, traditionally a major supplier of arms to India, agreed in 2018 to supply India with the S-400 air defense system. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2019, where he offered a \$1 billion line of credit for development of the Russian Far East and discussed plans for a Vladivostok–Chennai sea link. The two countries are partners in the North-South Transport Corridor.

Russia also stood to benefit from an apparent improvement in China–India relations following the border standoff at Doklam during the summer of 2017. Following the Doklam crisis, during which Russia maintained neutrality, the Chinese and Indian leaders held informal summits during Modi’s visit to Wuhan in April 2018 and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s trip to Chennai in October 2019. In June 2019, Putin, Xi, and Modi held a trilateral meeting of RIC heads of state during the G20 summit in Osaka. During India–Pakistan crises over Kashmir in February and August 2019, Russia maintained neutrality while China supported its ally, Pakistan, in both cases.

China–India Tensions Threaten Russia’s Strategy

After this period of relative success in Russia’s relations with both China and India, events in 2020 cast Russia’s

approach into doubt. A standoff between Chinese and Indian armed forces along the two countries’ Himalayan border, which began in May, turned deadly on June 15 when a skirmish broke out in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops. China, which enjoyed a military advantage in the region, appeared to be responding to India’s attempts to strengthen its position. Amid the deterioration in U.S.–China relations following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, China may also have intended to send India a warning signal, aiming to deter it from making moves to strengthen its relations with the United States. The clash appeared to have the opposite effect, however, as Indian leaders concluded that their only viable response to the growing threat posed by China was to increase coordination with the United States, Japan, and other democracies.

The border clash put Russia in an awkward position. Russia adopted a neutral position on the dispute and sought to maintain friendly relations with both countries. Russian leaders also made it clear that they had no desire to act as a mediator. On June 23, Russia hosted a videoconference of RIC foreign ministers, which had already been rescheduled because of the pandemic. The three foreign ministers agreed in advance that they would not discuss the border dispute. Both the Chinese and Indian defense ministers attended the following day’s delayed ‘Victory Day’ parade in Moscow commemorating the 75th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Despite its neutrality, Russia appeared to offer reassurance to India by promising to accelerate deliveries of the S-400, as well as 33 fighter jets. Almost simultaneously, Russia announced that further deliveries of the S-400 to China would be suspended. The official explanation cited the pandemic, but observers speculated that the border clash had been the true reason.

Conclusion

Under the circumstances described above, Russia will face increased difficulty in achieving its objectives in the Russia–India–China triangle. If the China–India rivalry continues to intensify, then Russia will be hard-pressed to act in concert with these two countries, whether in RIC, BRICS, the SCO, or any other format. In its relations with China, Russia argues that its own ties with India serve a useful purpose for China by discouraging India from aligning with the United States. If India–U.S. ties continue to grow, then this argument will lose force. India would prefer to maintain its longstanding friendship with Russia, ideally by driving a wedge between Russia and China. India recently floated the possibility of Russia’s participation in a Russia–India–Japan diplomatic grouping. Such overtures are unlikely to interest

Russia anytime soon, however. The Russian leadership has concluded that its main foreign policy problem at present is its confrontation with the West, which necessitates cooperation with China for the foreseeable future. Even if Russia could repair its relations with the West, it would be reluctant to risk a downturn in relations with China, its increasingly powerful neighbor. China, which faces growing international hostility, is likely to work assiduously to maintain Russia's support.

In the near term, Russia and India will seek to shore up their relationship. Putin planned to visit India in late 2020, but the pandemic delayed his visit until sometime in 2021. India withdrew from Russia's 'Kavkaz-2020' military exercise in September, reportedly because of China's participation, but Russia and India later held joint naval exercises near the Strait of Malacca. Russia's traditional role as an arms supplier to India could provide continuity in the relationship. India agreed to purchase the S-400 even at the risk of incurring U.S. sanctions for doing so, though U.S. policymakers could grant India a waiver on this issue in the interest of maintaining cooperation against China. Ultimately, Indian officials

recognize that their security requires heightened cooperation with the United States and other democracies. In the event of an armed conflict with China, they know that they cannot count on military support from Russia.

Despite the mutual desire of Russia and India to preserve their long-established friendship, signs of tension are apparent. Retired Indian diplomats have expressed dissatisfaction with Russia's repeated criticism of India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, including Lavrov's December 2020 accusation that Western countries were attempting to draw India into "anti-Chinese games." In recent years, Russia's diplomatic outreach to Pakistan has also raised concerns in India. In an extreme case, which remains unlikely, a breakdown of Russia-India relations could lead Russia towards forming a bloc with China and Pakistan. Neither Russia nor India would welcome such an outcome, but the intensification of great-power rivalry in Asia could cause regional alignments to grow rigid, reducing diplomatic flexibility. Russia's aspirations for the Russia-India-China triangle could become a casualty.

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