

# The Russia-India-China Trio in the Changing International System

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**Abstract:** Shifting power balances on the Eurasian continent present both challenges and opportunities for further trilateral cooperation among Russia, India, and China (RIC). The call for a new Asia-Pacific security architecture underscores the strategic importance of a closer trilateral relationship. From a macro perspective, the current international system and regional structure offer favorable conditions for building a strategic RIC trio, yet at the micro level, major barriers will largely remain with regard to the domestic politics, public perceptions and policy implementation of the three countries. Only by strengthening strategic planning and operational cooperation while drawing lessons from the development of other multi-lateral cooperation mechanisms, can the three countries advance their strategic ties to a new level.

*Keywords:* Russia–India–China (RIC) relationship; strategic planning; Asia-Pacific security architecture; institutional cooperation.

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*China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 431–447  
DOI: 10.1142/S2377740016500275

As the three largest countries on the Eurasian landmass with substantial regional influence, Russia, China, and India are not only major reformers of the international system, but they are also key stakeholders in maintaining peace and stability in Asia. With the enduring global power realignment, the international system has been undergoing profound and complex changes, creating ever more grave challenges to regional security. Against this backdrop, stabilizing and strengthening the Russia-India-China (RIC) relationship by enhancing their institutional cooperation will greatly contribute to peace and development of the region.

The idea of a RIC trio dates back to 1998, and the annual meeting among RIC foreign ministers was institutionalized in 2002. Remarkable progress has been achieved since then in RIC cooperation, including a series of Track II exchanges and the establishment of a dialogue mechanism. However, compared with other more active multilateral mechanisms, RIC cooperation has made little advancement in institution building and concrete cooperation programs.

At the 14th RIC foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow on April 18, 2016, the three countries "called for the development of an open, inclusive, indivisible and transparent security and cooperation architecture in the region on the basis of universally recognized principles of international law,"<sup>1</sup> and decided to hold trilateral consultation on Asia-Pacific affairs later in that year. The meeting marked a new trilateral consensus on the necessity of furthering their cooperation and building a new security architecture for the Asia-Pacific. Yet, to achieve these goals, the three countries need to work harder and more closely together on their top-level design and sound policy planning.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joint Communiqué of the 14th Meeting of Foreign Ministers from the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and the Republic of India, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 19, 2016, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1356650.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Ma Jiali, "Zhonggeyin Sanjiao Guanxi de Xinfazhan [New Developments in China-Russia-India Trilateral Relations]," *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 7 (2005), pp. 59–62; Zhao Gancheng, "Zhonggeyin Zhanlue Guanxi de Zhengce Yiyi yu Fazhan Qianjing [Policy Implication and Prospects of the China-Russia-India Strategic Relationship]," *Southeast Asia Studies*, No. 2 (2005), pp. 3–7; and Wu Yongnian, "Lun Ershiyi Shiji Guoji Guanxi Zhong de Zhonggeyin Zhanlue Sanjiao [On the RIC Strategic Triangle in Twenty-first Century International Relations]," *Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Studies*, No. 5 (2006), pp. 47–53.

This article first reviews the current situation and strategic importance of RIC cooperation. It subsequently analyzes the positive and negative factors in the RIC relationship. This is followed by an exploration into the areas where the three countries can promote the building of a new Asia-Pacific security architecture with enhanced joint efforts. Finally, it offers a few policy recommendations for future development of the RIC trio.

### **Current Situation and Significance of the RIC Trio**

Russia and India are the largest amongst China's neighbors. Together, the three countries constitute the greater part of geographical and geopolitical presence on the Eurasian continent. In terms of natural conditions, the three countries cover a total landmass of nearly 30 million square kilometers, with a population of over 2.5 billion, more than two-fifths of the world's total, not to mention their abundant natural resources. In economic conditions, all are emerging economies, with a total GDP of over US\$14 trillion, accounting for 18 percent of the world's total. According to IMF statistics, as of 2015, China was the second largest economy in the world, while India ranked the eighth and Russia, the thirteenth.<sup>3</sup> In terms of geopolitical influence, all the three countries are heavyweight players in their neighborhoods and wield considerable influence in global affairs. Certainly, these facts alone do not tell the whole story about what the RIC trio could mean for the political and security landscape of Eurasia. Compared with other bilateral or multilateral cooperation mechanisms, the RIC trio has a unique and important role to play in maintaining regional peace and stability.

In the first place, closer RIC coordination represents a non-ideological pattern of major-power cooperation on regional security. The three countries differ greatly in political culture and values: China adheres to a socialist political system with Chinese characteristics; calling itself a sovereign democracy, Russia takes pride in its own version of freedom and democracy that is distinct from the traditional Western definition;<sup>4</sup> built on the British

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<sup>3</sup>IMF, "World Economic Outlook: Too Slow for Too Long," April 2016, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/01/pdf/text.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Zhang Shuhua, "Eluosi de Zhuquan Minzhulun [Russia's Sovereign Democracy Theory]," *Political Science Studies*, No. 4 (2016), pp. 26–31; and Pang Dapeng, "Eluosi de Zhuquan Minzhu Sixiang [Russia's Thinking on 'Sovereign Democracy']," *European Studies*, No. 4 (2008), pp. 89–103.

model, India pursues a non-Western development approach and presents itself as a democratic model for the developing world. Nevertheless, in dealing with foreign affairs, they share a wide range of common interests such as pursuing an independent foreign policy, promoting reforms of the international system, building a more just and reasonable international order, and enhancing regional security. Therefore, closer cooperation among China, Russia, and India will serve as a good example for non-ideological strategic cooperation among major powers of the world.

It is important to note that closer RIC cooperation is not intended to balance against other major powers, nor does it constitute an allied relationship modeled after Western alliances. The RIC trio is not guided by a unified ideology; instead, it promotes greater multi-polarity and democratization of international relations. Rather than try to forge a military and political alliance for expanding their regional influence, the three countries are seeking equality, mutual respect, and enduring common prosperity for all.

Second, the RIC trio is hoping to introduce a new template for regional cooperation in various fields. At present, a new pattern is taking shape under which political cooperation goes side by side with economic cooperation, and strengthened trilateral ties generate closer multilateral coordination.

At the economic level, Russia and India, as economic powerhouses on the Eurasian continent, can serve as two pillars of China's "Belt and Road" initiative. China and India boast enormous human capital and great potential for continuing economic development, while Russia enjoys the technological advantages of a traditional industrial power. Each is the others' important market and trading partner. As the current focus of China's "Belt and Road" initiative, Central Asia and South Asia are also crucial regions for the Russian and Indian economy. Thus, the combination of China's infrastructure-building capacity, abundant financial capital and huge market potential, India's software engineering talent and high-tech labor force, and Russia's strategic initiatives of the "Far East Development"

Based on different political models, the RIC trio showcases a new approach of major-power cooperation on salient regional affairs.

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and “Trans-Eurasia Belt Development,” will provide extra momentum for the advancement of the “Belt and Road” initiative.<sup>5</sup>

In May 2015, China and Russia agreed to integrate China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” initiative and Russia’s “Eurasian Economic Union,” with the aim of sustaining regional economic growth, promoting regional economic integration, and safeguarding regional peace and development.<sup>6</sup> In June 2016, during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Russian President Putin proposed an Extensive Eurasian Partnership with China and India.<sup>7</sup> In light of some countries’ growing suspicion and potential setbacks of globalization in present days, closer economic ties among the three countries will both benefit the RIC trio and help sustain the positive trends of regional economic cooperation.

At the political level, despite occasional ups and downs, China’s relations with Russia and India have been increasingly strengthened since China’s reform and opening-up in the late 1970s. With the improvement of the global and regional strategic environments, the three pairs of relationship among the three countries have also developed to new heights. India regards Russia as “a time-tested and reliable friend and a major partner in building India’s defense capabilities.”<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the Sino-Russia Partnership of Comprehensive Strategic Coordination is hailed by both sides as a new model of major-power relationship featuring harmony,

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<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Sergey Luzyanin and Sergei Sazonov, “Silk Road Economic Belt, the 2015 Model,” *Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Studies*, No. 4 (2015), pp. 7–12; Qin Fangming and Ji Xiaogang, “Sichouzhilu Jingjidai Jianshe yu Ouya Jingji Lianmeng Duijie Hezuo Yanjiu [On Coordinating the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union],” *Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Studies*, No. 4 (2015), pp. 34–40.

<sup>6</sup>Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Aligning the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 9, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/t1262143.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1262143.shtml).

<sup>7</sup>See Vladimir Putin’s Speech at St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, June 17, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178/videos>.

<sup>8</sup>“India Prime Minister to Elevate India-Russia Relations,” Sputnik news, June 19, 2014, [http://sputniknews.cn/radiovr.com.cn/news/2014\\_06\\_19/273711849/](http://sputniknews.cn/radiovr.com.cn/news/2014_06_19/273711849/). See also P. Stobdan, ed., *India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Common Perspectives* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2010); and Nivedita Das Kundu, ed., *India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Challenges and Prospects* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2010).

constructiveness, equality, mutual trust and benefit, and win-win cooperation, which contributes to a more just and sound multi-polar world order and the democratization of international relations.<sup>9</sup> Though the China-India relationship has not progressed as rapidly as the other two pairs of relationship, both sides have begun to take efforts to strengthen their cooperation since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office, and agreed to build a closer partnership for common development.<sup>10</sup>

The parallel development of the three pairs of bilateral ties contributes to overall peace and stability in the bulk of Eurasia, which, in turn, facilitates closer interactions among the three countries. What is noteworthy about the RIC trio is that it has not only set up a new pattern of regional political and economic cooperation, but also engendered a viable pathway toward building a new Asia-Pacific security architecture.

Third, the RIC trio can serve as the core of a collective Eurasian platform to address the maritime security pressures in the Asia-Pacific, a big step toward realizing the notion of “Asian affairs run by Asian countries” proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping on the Summit Meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014. Thus a stronger RIC trio will exert major impact on the regional security landscape.

Indeed, the Eurasian continent — especially the Asia-Pacific region — has witnessed increasing challenges in both traditional and non-traditional security realms over the past years, such as the spillover effects of the

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<sup>9</sup>Joint statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Chinese Foreign Ministry, June 26, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/t1375315.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1375315.shtml). For the significance and achievements in Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership of Coordination, see Liu Guchang, “*Buduan Maishang Xintaijie de Zhonghe Zhanlue Xiezu Huoban Guanxi* [Sino-Russo Strategic Partnership of Coordination in Constant Progress],” *Russia Studies*, No. 1 (2010), pp. 3–10; and Xing Guangcheng, “*Shenhua Zhonghe Zhanlue Xiezu Huoban Guanxi Neihan* [Deepening the Connotations of the Sino-Russo Strategic Partnership],” *China International Studies*, No. 5 (2011), pp. 44–55.

<sup>10</sup>Joint statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India, Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 15, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/t1264174.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1264174.shtml); and Joint statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India on Building a Closer Developmental Partnership, Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 15, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/t1193043.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1193043.shtml).

Afghanistan reconstruction process, the escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula, persistent territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea, and constant infiltration by terrorists and violent extremists, all bringing greater risks to regional peace and stability. In this context, closer RIC cooperation has become all the more important in that it can help address all these challenges more effectively. If a mature RIC trio for managing those hot-spot issues is established, then it will serve as an institutional security platform capable of pooling national strategic assets to mediate and settle regional discords and disputes, thus preparing the ground for a new Asia-Pacific security architecture. With regard to China's strategic location, a stronger RIC trio will also help China maintain a peaceful neighborhood, crack down on the "three evil forces" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, and stabilize its Western frontier regions like Xinjiang.

Finally, closer RIC cooperation may increase the power of discourse for emerging countries as a whole in global governance. The globalization process has created multitudes of transnational problems that underscore the urgency and necessity of effective global governance. At the same time, a new round of global contest revolves around diverse development models and related narratives. Closer RIC cooperation with stronger institution-building efforts will encourage the three countries to speak in one voice on major global issues and maximize their respective roles in multiple international institutions. For instance, all the three countries see eye to eye with each other on the necessity of building a new Asia-Pacific security architecture, and many of their best practices and mechanisms in promoting such an architecture can be employed for more effective global governance in the future.

A stronger RIC trio will enhance the three countries' power of discourse and joint actions in addressing common global challenges.

While Russia, India and China want to strengthen their trilateral ties to address regional affairs, they have been working to advance their cooperation within major multilateral forums as well. Figure 1 shows that as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) seeks to expand itself, closer coordination among China, Russia and India will greatly influence the future trajectories of the SCO and CICA; in the meantime, other

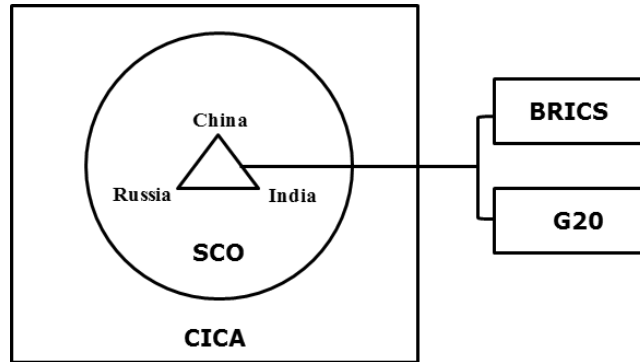


Fig. 1. RIC Cooperation on Multilateral Platforms.

globally influential institutions such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Group of Twenty (G20) have also provided higher and more extensive platforms for closer RIC cooperation.

Up to now, remarkable progress has been made in the institutionalization of RIC cooperation. Since the early 1990s, with China's rapprochement with both Russia and India, their trilateral relationship has been advancing on the fast track. When visiting India in 1998, Yevgeny Primakov, then Russia's foreign minister, put forward the idea of building a strategic triangle among Russia, China, and India, and in 2002, the first informal trilateral meeting of foreign ministers was held in New York. Since 2007, the informal meeting has become an annual, formal event on the three countries' diplomatic agendas, and it was decided then that a joint communiqué would be released after each meeting. By 2016, 14 foreign ministers' meetings (including informal ones) have been held and eight joint communiqués released, marking an early progress in the institutionalization of RIC cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

Given the considerable security and cooperation deficit in the Asia-Pacific, however, there remains much to be done to fully realize the potential of RIC cooperation. Above all, their overall interactions are still limited in both depth and scope. While political ties have been strengthened, their economic and trade relations as well as people-to-people exchanges have yet to be enhanced. Even in the political realm, the trilateral

<sup>11</sup>For the evolution of the foreign ministers' meeting, see [http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=SH2bs4vFA63\\_kF9yrBIQJ\\_hoeznCISPYLSA1cGE6F42ZibRMvteOFwN1q08flyD2yzkkBNLLLO-w7l8Eypq9K](http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=SH2bs4vFA63_kF9yrBIQJ_hoeznCISPYLSA1cGE6F42ZibRMvteOFwN1q08flyD2yzkkBNLLLO-w7l8Eypq9K).



relationship is often regarded as one of goodwill, rather than of genuine strategic cooperation where state leaders meet regularly to foster consensus and common actions on salient issues that are of strategic importance to all of them. Next, the Sino-Indian relationship remains weak in the trio, impeding the general RIC institutionalization process. Territorial disputes, the Pakistan factor, and discords over Tibet remain thorny issues. India's growing suspicion and concern about a rising China continues to reinforce its misperception of China as a threat.<sup>12</sup> Besides, negative public opinion in all the three countries toward each other has also hindered their further cooperation, and there is little consensus among the elites with regard to the benefits of RIC cooperation to their respective country. Enduring pessimism, vehement criticism, and even outright opposition still exist in their public media, which have shaped an untoward atmosphere for policy-making.<sup>13</sup>

### **Positive and Negative Factors in RIC Cooperation**

With shifting global and regional power balances, the RIC trio is entering a new era, faced by both opportunities and daunting challenges. In order to make sound strategic plans, it is necessary for Russia, India and China to examine both the positive and negative factors in their trilateral relationship.

On the positive side, the global political system and power balance are constantly changing in a way that will facilitate further institutionalization of the RIC trio. With the lingering impact of the global financial crisis, emerging powers such as the BRICS members are experiencing economic difficulties to varying degrees. But in general, the power shift from the West to the East is an irreversible trend and the collective rise of non-Western nations is an undeniable fact. As the three major non-Western countries in the world, Russia, China and India have to shoulder the bulk of the

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<sup>12</sup>Xiao Xian, "Zhongyin Zhijian ying Jinkuai Xiaochu 'Jiaoliu Chizi' [Eliminating Communication Deficit between China and India]," *World Affairs*, No. 4 (2015), pp. 56–57; and Zhang Guihong, "Zhongyin Guanxi de Quedingxing he Buquedingxing [(Un)Certainties in Sino-Indian Relationship]," *South Asia Studies*, No. 1 (2010), p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Yin Xinan, "Gonggong Waijiao yu Guojia Xingxiang: Zhongyin Guanxi Xin Shiye [Public Diplomacy and National Image: A New Perspective on China-India Relations]," *South Asia Studies Quarterly*, No. 3 (2013), pp. 20–25.

responsibility of promoting reforms of the Western-dominated international system and providing new concepts, ideas, and approaches for more effective global governance. In this regard, the three countries share long-term strategic interests.

Furthermore, as the power realignment accelerates in Eurasia, there is an urgent need for better management of salient issues in the three countries' common neighborhood. Admittedly, the strategic landscape of Eurasia has been undergoing major changes in recent years. On the one hand, the Obama administration has delayed troop withdrawal from Afghanistan to address the rising security concerns for the time being, though the long-term goal of lessening U.S. military presence in the country remains unchanged. As a result, the strategic structure of the entire Central and South Asian regions are being transformed. Afghanistan and the central part of the Eurasian continent will face even greater threats from violent terrorism due to the growing deficit in security governance.<sup>14</sup> As the common neighborhood of Russia, China and India, this region is of vital importance for the stability and security of their frontiers, thus necessitating closer security coordination among the three. In the meantime, the shifting regional power structure and the U.S.' possible withdrawal have opened up precious strategic space in the heartland of the Eurasian continent where the three countries can jointly enhance their role through closer strategic and policy coordination. If the RIC trio can provide more security public goods for the region, then it will boost the confidence of regional countries in building a new Asia-Pacific security architecture.

In addition, the evolving global geopolitical situation is also creating more momentum for closer cooperation among the three countries. *The Minsk Agreement* signed in February 2015 reduced, to some extent, the tensions over the Ukraine crisis, but Russia's relations with the West have substantially changed as a result of the latter imposing sanctions against it.<sup>15</sup> Western pressure has pushed Russia further eastward to seek

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<sup>14</sup>Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security and US Policy," CRS Report for Congress, RL30588, September 21, 2012.

<sup>15</sup>Rober Legvold, "Managing the New Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (July/August, 2014); Dmitri Trenin, "Get Ready World: The U.S.-Russian Rivalry Is Back," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 28, 2014, <http://Carnegie.ru/2014/05/28/get-readyworld- u.s.-russian-rivalry-is-back/hbvq>.

alternative political and economic partners in the Asia-Pacific. For example, in a joint communiqué released in June 2016, China and Russia declared that they would “forge a comprehensive Eurasian partnership on the basis of openness, transparency, and full consideration of respective interests, whose membership may include members of the Eurasian Economic Union, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN.”<sup>16</sup> Since Indian Prime Minister Modi took office, he has not only advanced the “Act East” policy, but also strengthened bilateral ties with major countries on the Eurasian continent like Russia and China by joining the SCO.<sup>17</sup> The shifting international landscape underscores the common interests of the three countries in both political and economic realms and will provide further impetus for their trilateral cooperation.

Reconfiguration of  
global power  
necessitates and  
facilitates closer RIC  
cooperation.

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On the negative side, there are four main issues that need to be taken into consideration. First, given the different political systems of Russia, India and China, the incentives for their cooperation is basically exogenous, which constrains the development of their trilateral ties. Non-Western powers as they are often called, they have little in common in terms of political system, values, and development path. Their different economic structures are yet to be linked by value and industrial chains through division of labor, and their separate development paths lead to diverging perceptions of Western theories and practices: India, a non-Western country usually regarded as the most pro-Western and susceptible to Western influence, tends to vacillate between the West and East in terms of strategic mentality and policy choices; Russia, on the other hand, often views the RIC trio as an expedient tool to balance Western influence. The different mindsets of the three will remain the biggest barrier for their further cooperation.

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<sup>16</sup>Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Chinese Foreign Ministry, June 26, 2016.

<sup>17</sup>On India’s Act East Policy, see “India’s Asia-Pacific Policy: From ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East,’” The Brookings Institution, September 9, 2014, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/09/09-india/20140909\\_india\\_east\\_aisa\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2014/09/09-india/20140909_india_east_aisa_transcript.pdf); and Sanjay Kumar, “India: Drawn to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/02/india-drawn-to-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>.

Second, the divergence in elite and public opinions of the three countries about the costs and benefits of the RIC trio seriously hinders their overall cooperation. For example, having long adopted a utilitarian principle in its foreign policy, India tends to hold a cautious view toward RIC cooperation and is very sensitive to the U.S. attitude toward its closer relationship with Russia and China. In comparison, Russia tends to look at the trilateral relationship from a traditional geopolitical perspective. To many Russians, a stronger RIC trio is at best a leverage that can be used to balance against the West, but it can hardly become a cornerstone of Russia's global strategy. More importantly, in setting their foreign policy priorities, both India and Russia place their relations with the United States and other Western countries ahead of RIC cooperation.<sup>18</sup>

Third, major security concerns and even disputes among the three also affect their further cooperation. The RIC trio is shaped not only by those structural changes of the international system, but also by hot-spot security issues in the region. For instance, the persistent discords between India and Pakistan will influence India's attitude toward RIC cooperation. Pakistan has kept a friendly relationship with both China and Russia and tends to fall back on China whenever its relationship with India sours.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, closer RIC cooperation will lower Pakistan's position in the three countries' foreign relations, and require great diplomatic wisdom on China's part to advance RIC cooperation whilst still simultaneously maintaining steady and healthy development of the Sino-Pakistani relationship. As another example, Russia has long viewed Central Asia as a region where it possesses exclusive and special interests, and thus it has stayed on high alert about joint RIC efforts to provide security public goods for the region. Although it endorses China's "Belt and Road" initiative, Russia is making every effort to promote its own initiative of the Eurasian Union in order to balance China's growing influence over and closer ties with Central Asian countries.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (London: Brookings Institute Press and Chatham House, 2008); and Jayanta Kumar Ray, *India's Foreign Relations: 1947–2007* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>19</sup>Masood Khalid, "Bajisitan dui Nanya Diqu Anquan Jushi de Renzhi [Pakistan's Perceptions of South Asian Security]," *South Asia Studies*, No. 3 (2009), pp. 27–30; and Amna Yusuf Khokhar, "Bajisitan Shijiao xia de Zhongyin Guanxi [Sino-Indian Relationship from a Pakistani Perspective]," *South Asia Studies*, No. 2 (2011), pp. 38–47.

<sup>20</sup>ФЕДОР ЛУКЬЯНОВ, Вот новый поворот, (2015-05-13). <http://rg.ru/2015/05/13/faza.html>.

Finally, all sorts of problems at the operational level — such as their trust deficit and relatively weak cooperation in non-political fields — have to be overcome to secure sound development and institutionalization of the RIC trio. Compared with their political coordination, economic and people-to-people exchanges among the three countries remain quite limited due to their huge differences in language, religious beliefs and cultural traditions, among other aspects. For example, tourism and cross-border education among them is far behind that with Western countries.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of intensive people-to-people exchanges, it is difficult to develop mutual understanding, and that is why the RIC trio has stayed at the ministerial level and remained vulnerable to the changing dynamics of world politics.

### **Closer RIC Cooperation under Sound Top-Level Design**

Ongoing transformation of the Eurasian geopolitical environment not only presents challenges and risks, but also promises opportunities and benefits. A new window of opportunity is opening for the trilateral relationship among Russia, India and China. Yet without sound strategic plans, the RIC trio may only be able to watch every opportunity pass by. It is time the three countries put closer RIC cooperation on their top agendas and worked together to build a more inclusive and sustainable framework for regional cooperation.

First of all, the RIC trio should join hands in building an inclusive and sustainable mechanism centered on continental powers for Asian security cooperation. Different from the U.S.-centered alliance system in the Asia-Pacific, however, it should not aim to be a balance against Western powers and welded as a strategic bargaining chip, but at providing more public goods for regional security. Nor should RIC cooperation be regarded as an

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<sup>21</sup>Take the number of people studying overseas as an example. According to the *White Book of China's Study Abroad (2015)*, the United States, Great Britain, and other advanced Western economies are the most favored destination of Chinese overseas students, while Russia and India are not in the Top 10 list. According to statistics released by China's Ministry of Education, the number of Chinese students studying in Russia was 25,000 while only 1,200 Chinese students were studying in India in 2012. According to a report released by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, by 2014, Chinese students studying in the United States had reached almost 300,000.

alternative to the relationship of any of the three countries with other countries, including the United States. Instead, all the three countries need to adhere to the principles of openness and inclusiveness and avoid targeting other countries in promoting RIC cooperation.

Next, the new Asian security concept outlined by Chinese President Xi Jinping in May 2014 should be adopted as the theoretical basis for closer RIC cooperation. Highlighting common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, this concept opposes the traditional pattern of zero-sum competition among major powers, and advocates an overall and relative sense of security shared by all, thus downplaying the value of security alliances in the modern context. Without this concept, it would be difficult for the RIC trio to lead the way to a new, more inclusive and stable Asia-Pacific security architecture.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, a more just and sustainable regional order must be built upon ample mutual trust and a shared blueprint among Russia, China and India. As leaders of the three countries have all consolidated their domestic power bases, they should start making step-by-step plans to advance RIC cooperation in the coming decade. For the next one or two years, the three countries should try to enhance their mutual understanding and trust by promoting political, trade, and cultural exchange, so as to lay a solid foundation for further RIC cooperation. In the medium term, i.e., the next five to six years, as their mutual trust grows, the three countries can put more effort into institutionalizing their trilateral ties. By then, a new model of security cooperation based on the new Asian security concept is expected to have been built for the greater part of the Eurasian continent.

The next decade is decisive to the advancement of RIC cooperation with concrete action plans in the economic, security and cultural arenas.

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<sup>22</sup>Xi Jinping, "New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation," Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21, 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1159951.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1159951.shtml). See also Cheng Guoping, "Yazhou Anquanguan: Yinling Yazhou Anquan Hezuo Xinfangxiang [Asian Security Concept: A New Direction for Asian Security Cooperation]," *Qiushi*, No. 14 (2014).

Pragmatic approaches need to be employed to realize such a long-term blueprint of RIC cooperation. At the operational level, the three countries should prepare the ground for developing closer ties by increasing their communication and exchange in economic, security, and cultural realms, and promote joint programs at both the national and local levels. They must try to avoid a self-centered mentality and focus on making tangible progress in as many areas as possible, consolidating and expanding cooperation platforms among them, and fostering mutual understanding and trust among their publics.

In the economic realm, the three countries should make full use of their comparative advantages in natural and human resources. Energy cooperation is an area of most converging strategic interests for them. It is desirable to create a cooperation model that involves Russia as an exporter, India as an importer, and China as a transit. In infrastructure building, they can engage in each other's infrastructure projects by increasing reciprocal investments. In particular, China can devote more to the trilateral economic cooperation by dovetailing its "Belt and Road" initiative with the development strategies of Russia and India and pushing for a new round of rule-making process in trade and investment.

Russia and China have recently increased cooperation in a range of economic sectors such as oil and gas, coal mining, electricity, and renewable energy, and are exploring new areas of cooperation by linking the development of China's northeast with Russia's Far East and that of China's Yangtze River with Russia's Volga River.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, China and India have also strengthened economic cooperation in such sectors as medicine, information technology, tourism, textile, and agricultural products while trying to remove barriers to their bilateral trade and investment.<sup>24</sup> So far, the three countries have agreed to work together on building high-speed railways and to finance more development projects through such financial institutions as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). Extensive economic cooperation will not only bring tangible benefits to their respective publics, but also enhance

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<sup>23</sup>Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Chinese Foreign Ministry, June 26, 2016.

<sup>24</sup>Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 15, 2015.

their mutual trust gradually, thus consolidating the foundation of the tri-lateral relationship.

In the security realm, the Afghanistan issue and other non-traditional security issues provide many opportunities for closer RIC coordination. A regional strategic vacuum may emerge as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan, opening up new space for the three countries to strengthen coordination out of their common security concerns. They should work more closely together to address those non-traditional security challenges in Central Asia, such as transnational terrorism, water disputes and food crises, and play a leading role in the management of hot-spot issues as well as regional governance, including regional nuclear arms control. Maintaining regional security and stability is the focus of RIC cooperation, thus the three countries need to promote a new Asia-Pacific security architecture that best serves this goal while trying to minimize geopolitical competition.

In the cultural realm, the three countries should facilitate increased exchanges and joint studies among research institutions and think tanks, and foster consensus among the elites through Track II meetings on RIC cooperation. It is also important to promote exchanges among institutions of higher education through more student exchange programs, course sharing, and jointly-operated colleges. Tourism needs to be expanded by simplifying visa procedures. Moreover, nongovernmental organizations in the three countries should be encouraged to conduct cultural activities and programs in the form of movies, TV dramas, publications and so on, which will enhance mutual understanding among the general publics.

It is worth noting that RIC cooperation should not be confined to the national level, but it must engage local governments and communities as well. Cooperation programs directed by central governments may be difficult to sustain due to their lack of knowledge about or sensitivity to local realities. Therefore, local enthusiasm and concerns must be taken into account while making plans for concrete programs and projects, especially in those frontier areas, and flexibility should be allowed in implementing these programs according to diverse local conditions.

## **Conclusion**

Boasting vast territories and large populations, Russia, China, and India are all land-based powers with considerable maritime capabilities. It is an



unprecedented endeavor to establish a viable trilateral institution involving three politically, economically, and culturally diverse countries on the Eurasian continent to provide regional and even global public goods. To strengthen the RIC trio, the three countries have to learn from the best practices of other trilateral institutions. At the same time, it is also imperative for them to preserve their respective uniqueness.

On one hand, China, Russia and India must try to build a closer partnership based on the three pairs of bilateral relationships rather than seek to form a tripartite alliance, because none wants the RIC trio to be viewed as an anti-West bloc. In the foreseeable future, a closer partnership is the most rational and viable strategic option for the three countries to promote their pragmatic cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, RIC cooperation needs to focus on both the form and the substance. Equal importance should be attached to tangible and practical cooperation as well as conceptual innovation. While practical cooperation serves as a solid basis for closer trilateral coordination, conceptual innovation helps set future cooperation agendas and identify potential cooperation areas. In practical cooperation, the three countries should promote joint programs in economic, security, and cultural realms at both national and local levels; in conceptual innovation, they must tap into their respective tradition and culture, so as to develop new cooperation concepts that can be embraced by their general publics. Reflecting their common endeavor to achieve peace and shared prosperity, those new cooperation concepts will help rationalize RIC cooperation and amplify the voice of the three countries in international arenas.

In sum, forging a stronger RIC trio is a systematic project requiring not only a higher degree of institutionalization, but also closer coordination among the three countries in broader international institutions such as BRICS, G20, and the SCO. To promote the RIC trio in a more comprehensive way, tripartite working groups can be formed to exchange ideas, make plans, and coordinate positions among the three on major global issues when it comes to agenda setting for global and regional institutions.

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<sup>25</sup>Su Changhe, "Jieban bu Jiemeng [Seeking Partnerships instead of Alliances]," *Jiefang Daily*, October 15, 2013; Men Honghua and Liu Xiaoyang, "Zhongguo Huobanguanxi Zhanlue Pinggu yu Zhanwang [Assessment and Prospects of China's Partnership Strategy]," *World Economics and Politics*, No. 2 (2015), pp. 65–95.