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- Jul 29 2020
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RIC, BRICS and SCO: The pandemic and its consequences

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RIC, BRICS and SCO will have the unenviable task of managing bilateral divergences, setting the future agenda and retaining relevance for its constituents — all in the midst of contestation about the structure of a future world order.



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This article is part of an online collaboration between Valdai Club — Think Tank Project, and Observer Research Foundation.

It was in 2001, with the signing of the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), that the Eurasian intergovernmental organisation established itself in the current form. India became an observer at SCO in 2005 and a full member in 2017. The year 2002 saw the first meeting of foreign ministers under the Russia-India-China (RIC) plurilateral, with annual meetings beginning from 2007. The idea of BRICS (originally BRIC) was floated by Jim O’Neill in 2001 but the first summit meeting took place only in 2009, with South Africa joining the group in 2010.

The timeline is of particular significance here, as these mechanisms emerged out of a specific set of domestic, regional and global conditions prevailing at the time, impacting the decision-making of Russia, India and China — all three of which are key players in the above-mentioned groupings. While the emerging powers were anticipating a future multipolar international system, they sought to maintain cordial relations with the US and other western powers. The US, while aware of the consequences on the world system of a rising power, had not announced its intention to contain China. The latter, on the other hand, was insisting on its peaceful rise through economic development of its people. This gave enough space to other powers to hedge their bets by following a diversified foreign policy instead of being forced into bloc mentality.

For at least the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these growing fault lines and revealed the extent of decline of liberal internationalism, reflected in the ineffectual response of international institutions to mount a worldwide joint response.

However, these trends have been under stress in recent years — characterised by increasing US-China rivalry, breakdown of Russia-West relations, backlash against globalisation, rising inequalities and decline of multilateral cooperation. For at least the short term, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these growing fault lines and revealed the extent of decline of liberal [internationalism](#), reflected in the ineffectual response of international institutions to mount a worldwide joint response. These trends — in which Russia, India and China remain deeply entangled — will impact RIC, BRICS and SCO in terms of their role, agenda-formation and future trajectory in unique ways.

Russia-India-China

The RIC plurilateral had already been under the scanner as the foreign policies of member-states underwent significant developments in the past few years. The annual foreign ministers’ meetings, while producing joint communiqués, did not lead to lessening of bilateral tensions resulting from the RIC engagement or advance ‘[institution](#) building’ or produce ‘concrete cooperation programs.’ The fractured Sino-Indian bilateral equation was identified as the major reason for this even as Russia balanced its relations with both its strategic partners.

The RIC has found it increasingly difficult to build on its aim of ‘consultation and coordination on regional and global issues of mutual interest,’ given that India and China have diverged on the

content of these principles.

There has also been a shift in the balance of [power](#) relations within the group. As India has become closer to the US in the Indo-Pacific, raising the importance of other plurilaterals like Japan-America-India and the Quad, China has pursued an increasingly aggressive policy in its neighbourhood. The rise of China has led scholars to classify it as the ‘greatest [challenge](#)’ facing India, with relations steadily getting ‘adversarial’ both in bilateral and regional realm.

In this context, the RIC has found it increasingly difficult to build on its aim of ‘consultation and [coordination](#) on regional and global issues of mutual interest,’ given that India and China have diverged on the content of these principles. As foreign minister S. Jaishankar noted in the most recent RIC meeting held online that the main challenge remained not just of ‘concepts and norms’ but of ‘practice.’ While the importance of sustained dialogue between even adversarial powers remains relevant and some areas of coordination exist, RIC has broadly been more about ‘[goodwill](#)’ and less about ‘strategic cooperation.’ Moreover, contrasting views on shape of the future world order also put a strain on the plurilateral, constraining its ability to lead to genuine trilateral coordination.

BRICS

Unlike RIC, BRICS has over the years succeeded in institutionalising its relationship among members through several initiatives (New Development Bank, Contingency Reserve Arrangement, regular ministerial meetings of various sectors, working groups). This has lent more stability to the organisation that is currently grappling with setting up its future agenda and where it will face the greatest complication. The growing Sino-Indian rivalry is expected to limit the ‘[range](#) of issues’ where members will be able to find consensus.

The post-pandemic BRICS will find it harder to expand beyond economic and financial cooperation — especially in the ambitious aims found in its Brasilia declaration of reform of the multilateral system and cooperation in regional situations.

Even before the pandemic hit, questions around future agenda of the organisation and the ‘core [strategy](#)’ were swirling around. Russia’s desire for ‘expanding foreign policy [coordination](#)’ as its 2020 chair looks increasingly elusive; driven once again by the limitations Sino-Indian equation poses. BRICS is yet to establish itself as an ‘[independent](#) variable’ in global affairs given the wide divergences in policies of member states. The internal, bilateral contradictions combined with fears of ‘great-[power](#) rivalry and strategic decoupling’ between US and China will complicate foreign policies of BRICS member states — posing a challenge to organisational agenda formation and raising risk of an ‘internal [split](#).’

Due to the causes discussed above, the post-pandemic BRICS will find it harder to expand beyond economic and financial cooperation — especially in the ambitious aims found in its [Brasilia](#) declaration of reform of the multilateral system and cooperation in regional situations. While the utility of its current mechanisms can hardly be denied and cooperation with [flexibility](#) is a plus point in this time of flux, the very factors that were its advantages in the past now pose a challenge to the future development of BRICS; threatening to limit its voice in building a multipolar world order.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The SCO, which admitted India and Pakistan as full members in 2017, has traditionally focused on security issues like terrorism, separatism and extremism. India's desire to join the Eurasian organisation was seen as a ['geopolitical hedge'](#) by some as well as reflective of its desire for increased coordination with Central Asia. But the presence of Pakistan has raised questions about bilateral Indo-Pak issues complicating the organisational agenda and hindering its ability to ['reach consensus'](#) on different issues. Another challenge, just like in the case of RIC and BRICS, will be the Sino-Indian rivalry.

The developments in Sino-Indian equation has since soured the achievement of this goal and introduced additional complexity to internal institutional dynamics.

Even though issues of Afghanistan, [connectivity](#) and counterterrorism make SCO an attractive body, concerns had been raised about diminishing [clout](#) of SCO in achieving results on the ground much before India joined the group. Russia and China too have had differences in SCO, with the former wanting to focus on [military](#) issues while the latter desires coordination on economic issues. Given that China did not find SCO willing to accommodate its agenda, it has pushed ahead with bilateral ties in the region on the back of OBOR. The Russian effort to expand the organisation by backing Indian entry was aimed to lead to ['multipolar cooperation'](#) and ['dilute Chinese domination.'](#) However, the developments in Sino-Indian equation has since soured the achievement of this goal and introduced additional complexity to internal institutional dynamics. While the argument for advantages accrued from SCO cooperation in areas of common concern remains, the difficulty it has faced in coming up with concrete action plans or [organisational](#) work have brought it at a [crossroad](#).

Conclusion

As noted above, Russia, India and China have seen rapid developments in their respective foreign policies in recent years. Whether it is the breakdown of Russia's relations with the West or closer Indo-US relations or an increasingly aggressive China — it has been a period of constant change in an unstable international system. This has also prompted an enunciation of different projects to deal with the uncertainties and expand their respective influence — from Greater Eurasia to Indo-Pacific to One Belt, One Road. In addition, the Sino-US and US-Russia rifts have been described as ['systemic'](#) and expected to continue for some time.

As established multilateral institutions face questions of legitimacy — having been found wanting in dealing with the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19 — the alternative offered by the institutions under discussion too portends disappointment.

It is these heightened bilateral rivalries and their resultant impact on strategic postures of emerging powers that has brought into stark relief the inherent limitations of the above-mentioned organisations — further exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world order. While this does not preclude the importance of multilateralism, the prevailing conditions have raised questions about the priority ascribed to varied institutions by member-countries. As the systemic changes intensify, it is expected that ['nature and scope'](#) of these relations will vary — affecting the functioning of multilateral institutions as well.

As a result, RIC, BRICS and SCO will have the unenviable task of managing bilateral divergences, setting the future agenda and retaining relevance for its constituents — all in the midst of contestation about the structure of a future world order. As established multilateral institutions face questions of legitimacy — having been found wanting in dealing with the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19 — the alternative offered by the institutions under discussion too portends disappointment.

There is little doubt that the trio of Moscow, New Delhi and Beijing will play a role in shaping a future world order. However, the organisations in which they play central roles will face numerous challenges, as discussed above, in their efforts to achieve a similar goal. While the ongoing uncertainty is only a byproduct of the churn underway in the global system, the future looks more complicated than ever for RIC, BRICS and SCO.

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