

Unable to Lead, Reluctant to Follow

RUSSIAN, CHINESE, AND INDIAN APPROACHES TO BALANCING AND BANDWAGONING WITH THE WEST

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Despite increased uncertainty about the economic prospects of Russia, India, and China (RIC), these countries continue to attract significant attention as potential sources of concerted counterbalancing postures vis-à-vis the developed world. Ideas about creating an informal grouping—RIC—to coordinate foreign policies have been on the table since the late 1990s.² All three prospective members have been positioning themselves as aspiring nations capable of sustaining economic growth without excessive dependence on developed states. However, relations along the three sides of the imagined China-Russia-India triangle have proven uneven. Moscow has touted its “strategic partnership” with Beijing (dating from their 2001 Friendship Treaty), and there are sizeable Chinese investments in the Russian energy sector. China has also engaged economically with India, but China-India ties have not been as close as they need to be for RIC to graduate into a full-fledged multilateral consultation forum. Defying expectations, the three states have not been issuing joint high-profile declarations highlighting their unity or aligning views to facilitate coordination on pressing issues of global relevance.

The main structural reason for this lack of cohesion is that RIC is composed of states that do not have enough allure and resources to play a global leadership role but are reluctant to follow any other powers aspiring to such a role. The RIC states do not

¹ The views expressed here are solely those of the author and not those of MGIMO or the MacArthur Foundation.

² In the 2000s, RIC countries along with Brazil and South Africa formed BRICS – a more formalized grouping which has been holding annual summits since 2009 and contemplating far-reaching projects, such as the establishment of a development bank to rival the Bretton Woods institutions. However, while adding certain weight and legitimacy to the RIC’s bid for recognition as a global force to be reckoned with, Brazil and South Africa do not add much to the group’s distinct message to the world. Therefore, for the sake of brevity, the positioning of the group of “aspiring nations” vis-à-vis the developed world is analyzed in this paper only through the prism of Chinese, Russian, and Indian approaches.

champion attractive global agendas, their foreign policy aspirations being focused mainly on their respective neighborhoods. At the same time, the RIC states cherish their freedom of maneuver on the world stage and refrain from committing to firm rules of alliance behavior—at least in the long term—if the alliance involves a peer nation and, particularly, the United States.

Pursuing their largely parochial interests, RIC states have for the most part hedged their bets when engaging in balancing behavior vis-à-vis the United States and its allies. In the course of the Ukraine conflict, however, Russia has tried to galvanize global anti-U.S. grievances and build a much more resolute anti-Western alliance. To date, this has elicited mixed responses by China and India. They have turned Russia's anti-Western bid to their own economic advantage, while avoiding picking sides in the dispute over Ukraine and refraining from conspicuously adversarial moves vis-à-vis the United States.

Responding to the West

Over a number of years, the RIC states have felt challenged by the West in a number of areas, including technology, conflict management, and international policy doctrine innovation. The technology challenge stems from Western development of high-precision weapons, potential space weapons, and prospective missile defenses. The conflict management challenge derives from the proclivity of the West to take sides in internal conflicts and support a party that one or another RIC state may not wish to win. The RIC states are also discomforted by developments in the field of international policy doctrine, whereby the West has been promoting the notion of solidarity with suffering populations of foreign states and the international community's purported responsibility to protect. Mainstream international affairs analysts in Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi consider humanitarian concerns to be a smokescreen for action aimed at achieving "geopolitical advantage," securing access to "strategic resources," or installing "externally-controlled" governments in "strategically important" states.

Over the past two decades, China, Russia, and India have been reacting to these and other challenges in at least four different ways:

- undertaking asymmetric measures to offset the West's advantage;
- seeking to impose legal constraints on the undesired trend;
- trying to match (or mirror) Western technologies and doctrines; and
- cooperating with the West in a given area of concern.

For example, Russia has been responding *asymmetrically* to the perceived threat that U.S. missile defenses pose to the viability of Russia's strategic deterrent by upgrading its mobile strategic nuclear missiles, a capability least susceptible to a surprise disarming first strike. It is as easy to find examples of asymmetric response to armed U.S.

interventions, including Russian diplomatic support and supplies to Bashar Assad's government in Syria and Russian and Chinese attempts to shield Iran from increasingly harsh non-UN sanctions by the United States and its allies.

Western doctrinal innovation—the concepts of solidarism, universal human rights, and “responsibility to protect” in the absence of UN Security Council approval—has also elicited a distinct asymmetric response. At different times, Chinese, Indian, and Russian authorities have taken care to limit the freedom of maneuver of both local and transnational nongovernmental organizations that are commonly viewed by these states as agents of hostile Western influence disguised as the promotion of universal rights or values.

Russia employed the strategy of imposing *legal constraints* on unwanted Western behavior when it sought to counter U.S. advances in high-precision conventional strategic weapons by insisting, during negotiations on the New START Treaty, that intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) armed with conventional warheads should be counted toward general ICBM limits alongside nuclear-tipped carriers.

China and Russia also have a long record of resisting “Western interventionism” through multilateral diplomacy. Both sides have vetoed or threatened to veto UNSC resolutions that opened up avenues for intervention in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Syria. Russia, China and, at times, India have countered Western doctrinal innovation by developing and promoting their own concepts. They have argued that the principle of sovereignty is one of the few powerful stabilizers in world politics, together with a balance of forces that prevents the dangerous “hegemony” of any single state.

As RIC states have grown stronger over the last decade, they have also tried out a number of *symmetrical or matching strategies*, attempting to balance the West by adopting policies that are mirror images of the West's own. As one countermove to U.S. nascent missile defenses, for example, Moscow announced in 2011 the formation of Russia's own Space Defense Forces (*Sily voenno-kosmicheskoi oborony*, or VKO) and earmarked for it tens of billions of dollars in funding over the next decade. Russia also claimed to mirror Western interventionism (as in Kosovo) when it engaged in conflicts over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea and then recognized or annexed them.

Russia also reciprocated Western doctrinal innovation by deploying R2P to justify its claims to Crimea and—potentially—parts of eastern Ukraine. According to the Kremlin, Russian “compatriots” in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were put at risk by the policies of the new Ukrainian authorities that allegedly sought to discriminate against ethnic Russians.

Chart 1. Responses by RIC states to Western Technological, Strategic, and Doctrinal Innovation

		<i>RESPONSE</i>			
		<i>Asymmetric</i>	<i>Legally constraining</i>	<i>Matching strategies</i>	<i>Cooperative</i>
CHALLENGE	<p><i>Advanced military technology:</i></p> <p>Missile defense, high-precision weapons, nuclear weapons, space weapons</p> <p>Non-proliferation regime (India)</p>	<p>Mobile missiles, anti-satellite weapons, new cruise missiles, testing of anti-satellite weapons (China 2007), high-precision anti-ship missiles</p>	<p>Inclusion of conventional weapons into strategic arms limits, proposing a treaty on non-weaponization of outer space</p> <p>Calls (by India) for abolishing nuclear weapons or being integrated into the NPT on a non-discriminatory basis (as a nuclear-weapon state)</p>	<p>Airspace Defense Forces established in Russia, Russia's upgrading of its own conventional weapons, India's development of nuclear weapons while being a NPT non-signatory</p>	<p>India's signing of the 2005 nuclear agreement with the United States, support for global nuclear disarmament initiatives</p>
	<p><i>Conflict management:</i></p> <p>Syria, Libya, Georgia, Kosovo</p>	<p>Arming the incumbent regime in Syria, resistance to the toughening of sanctions against Iran, assigning blame for the post-intervention chaos in Libya to NATO</p>	<p>Vetoing UNSC resolutions authorizing intervention or assistance to opposition in internal conflicts, asserting the indispensability of a UNSC mandate for intervention, proposals for multilateral binding treaties prohibiting the expansion of rival blocs (European Security Charter), attempting to prevent the recognition of Kosovo and enforce strict rules of peacemaking</p>	<p>Russian intervention into conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, Chinese claims to Taiwan</p>	<p>Russia's brokering of Syria's chemical disarmament, Chinese participation in the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden</p>
	<p><i>Doctrinal innovation:</i></p> <p>Notions of solidarism, transnational approaches to human rights and R2P, engagement with opposition movements and activists, freedom of states to choose alliances and affiliations</p>	<p>Constraining NGO activity (Russia), restricting foreign funding of NGOs (China, India)</p>	<p>Promoting rival narratives of unconditional respect for sovereignty as the only stabilizer in the international system versus external involvement in any anti-government protest</p> <p>Promoting a "spheres of influence" norm, whereby the interests of regional great powers (China in East and Southeast Asia, Russia in post-Soviet Eurasia, India in South Asia) in their respective regions should be respected by the United States and its allies; regional powers' freedom of action in "their" regions is needed to avoid security dilemmas and maintain stability in the areas around Russia and China. This norm may involve limits on the sovereignty of smaller neighbors, especially freedom to choose their own alliances.</p>	<p>Russia's display of solidarity with "compatriots" in Ukraine and upholding of the principle of self-determination</p>	<p>Russian support for UNSCR 1973 in March 2011 to protect civilians in Libya</p>

The final option for RIC states to respond to Western dominance is *to cooperate with the West*. Such cooperation has never come in the form of consistent bandwagoning but instead has occurred on an ad hoc basis. For example, upon entering the “nuclear club,” India chose to cooperate (to an extent) with the United States by signing a civil nuclear agreement. Russia, for its part, cooperated with the United States and U.S. allies on Syria’s chemical disarmament, at the time considered a step toward defusing the conflict in and around Syria. Together with a few other developing states, China took part in anti-piracy patrols of the waters around the Horn of Africa, a mission that turned out to be an indisputable success of multilateral cooperation.

The overall reaction by a RIC state to a given challenge has sometimes combined all of the above types of response. However, one type has usually been dominant in any state’s response at a given time.

Prospects for Full-Fledged Alliance

Each of the RIC states has hammered out a gamut of responses to Western challenges. Some of their reactions have converged while others have starkly differed. Coordination challenges have resulted from diverging foreign policy agendas as well as each actor’s determination to maintain its freedom of maneuver. Are the existing gaps in RIC perspectives likely to narrow in the wake of the Ukraine crisis? Can Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Ukraine spark a more coordinated RIC response to undesired conflict management and/or doctrinal innovation by the United States and its allies?

Over the last few years, Russia has vacillated between cooperating with the West and countering U.S. positions in post-Soviet Eurasia. Moscow has made several attempts to cooperate with Washington (for example, by the U.S.-Russian “reset” in general, allowing U.S. transit to and from Afghanistan, and putting pressure on Iran). During moments of cooperation, Russia perceived the strengthening of ties with the United States to be a good hedge against potential Chinese expansionism. At the same time, Moscow has increasingly braced for direct confrontation with the United States and its allies and has been eager to test Washington’s resolve on matters of principle. By spring 2014, Russia made it clear that it aspires to nothing less than a major rewrite of the post-Cold War rules of the game—at least as applied to Russia’s neighborhood. Russia has directed its strongest objections against the norm allowing smaller states to choose their alliances regardless of Russian security or economic concerns. Talk of a “divided nation” and the bid to protect “compatriots” anywhere in the world coupled with military force have represented a dramatic move against the status quo that the West is inclined to protect.

For Russia’s Ukraine gambit to succeed, a broadening coalition of states determined to balance the United States is essential. Lukewarm support or friendly neutrality of the

other two RIC states is better than criticism, but it is likely not enough to force the United States to honor Moscow's demands.

China is prepared to extend a financial lifeline to Russia by underwriting lucrative projects, such as the Power of Siberia pipeline. The May 2014 agreement on natural gas supplies through this yet-to-be-built pipeline implies an immediate disbursement of \$25 billion in cash – an important one-time infusion into Russia's slowing economy.

But at the diplomatic and military level, China is not prepared to escalate tensions with the United States beyond the point that the overall U.S.-China relationship would be jeopardized. Rather than support Moscow, Beijing abstained from UN Security Council and General Assembly votes in March 2014 on resolutions to condemn Russian actions in Crimea. Having signed the gas deal with Gazprom, Beijing proceeded to conduct joint naval maneuvers with the United States in July 2014 despite increased tensions between China and some U.S. allies in Asia.

For the moment, China is not demanding a major overhaul of the rules of the game in Eurasia or globally. Beijing only seeks to provide an asymmetric response to U.S. power in adjacent regions of the Pacific and incrementally push the boundaries of international, especially maritime, law. China's claims do not explicitly include the right to protect ethnic Chinese minorities in neighboring states or deny those states membership in U.S.-led trade or security blocs. While China at times has coordinated a balancing act with Russia against the United States and its allies, such opposition has not been as much a "matter of principle" for Beijing as it has been for Moscow. To see that, one only needs to compare the rhetoric of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

Like China, India refrained from condemning Russia for the annexation of Crimea. New Delhi is also opposed to the idea of Western sanctions. As the United States and the European Union began imposing sanctions on Russia early in 2014, India distanced itself from the West on the issue. India also clearly values its arms trade with Russia as well as access to Russian nuclear technologies. There are almost no contradictions between India and Russia on significant international issues.

However, New Delhi rejects territorial annexations in principle and does not agree with Russia's key assertion that U.S. interventions in the former Yugoslavia or Iraq legitimize interventionist policies by other players. In spring 2014, India most likely expressed concern to Moscow through diplomatic channels about any potential plans to intervene in eastern Ukraine. India is even less inclined than China to demand a rewrite of the international "rules of the game" – with the exception of those governing nonproliferation. Reportedly, New Delhi's main concern during the Crimea crisis was that China would feel emboldened to "expand its sphere of influence" at India's expense, as one Indian observer put it.

As a result, New Delhi does not feel hard-pressed to extend even symbolic support to Moscow beyond what the Indians feel to be appropriate. In addition, India's foreign policymaking capacity remains notoriously limited, which prevents New Delhi from engaging in risky international maneuvers that usually require plenty of intellectual and material resources to succeed.

Still, at the July 2014 BRICS summit, both India and China, along with Brazil and South Africa, joined Russia in issuing a declaration condemning "unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions in violation of international law" and attempts at "strengthen[ing] [one state's] security at the expense of the security of others." Contrary to its apparent relevance, the declaration was naturally not a reference to Russia's position on Crimea or the conflict in Ukraine. It was directed against the United States and U.S.-led alliances.

Conclusion

The prospects for RIC states to engage in ambitious multilateral security cooperation aimed at counterbalancing Western power, particularly in the context of the Ukraine conflict, appear limited. While China and Russia have occasionally coalesced to oppose various U.S. policies, India has been unwilling and unable to consistently challenge the developed nations in the security realm. Moscow and Beijing will continue to jointly promote legal constraints on U.S. power and leadership in multilateral fora, the United Nations and its agencies first and foremost. However, due to differences in their counterbalancing tactics, a united front of RIC (let alone BRICS) states ready to take on the United States and its allies around the globe is not likely to emerge out of the Ukraine crisis.