The 16th Russia-India-China (RIC) Trilateral Academic Conference

Theme: RIC: The Chances and Challenges in the Context of International Changes and Dynamics of Bilateral Relations

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Context of discussions:

- The conference was held in the backdrop of the 'informal summit' between India and China.
- The presence of strong leaders in all the three countries, Russia, China and India, was acknowledged.
- Repeated reference was made to the uncertainty and turbulence looming over the international system such as the intensification of strategic rivalry, concerns arising from Trump's protectionist measures and the ongoing trade tensions between the United States and China. Reference was also made to China's growing assertiveness across Asia-Pacific.

Hierarchical versus fair international order:

- There is a need to give the world necessary signals to work towards the establishment of a fair international order. However, there were differing views with regards the nuances.
- A polycentric world order has its challenges.
- There needs to be a shift from alliance models to networked states or flexible associations.

RIC as a trilateral:

- RIC nations need to observe and consider each other as equal counterparts.
- RIC has to work on consolidating its identity – an identity that will ensure the purpose of development and cooperation.
- Must work collectively on common issues of convergent interests.
- RIC should promote development at the regional as well as the global level.
- There is much potential for cooperation because of the complementarities of natural resources and industrial structures.
- RIC could think of establishing a formal institutional structure and set up a working group that could determine inter-sessional activities and then report its recommendations to the government.
- This was countered with the argument that it would hinder the smooth functioning and also curb its current adaptability towards developments in the international arena.
- It was pointed out that the three nations agreed with each other on the end goals but differed in tactics.

- All agreed that RIC must not just ideate, but unite and start working collectively.

Impact of bilateral relations on trilateral cooperation:

- There were differing views on the impact of bilateral relations on regional cooperation. While some saw it as influencing the nature of regional level cooperation, others argued otherwise.
- While bilateral relations influences the level of flexibility between two nations, it does not impact on the capacity to cooperate on platforms like the RIC trilateral, as the priorities differ.
- Adoption of a 'value based approach' towards building relationships rather than just focusing on a competitive framework was suggested in order to mitigate any impact.
- At the same time, good bilateral relations would not only curb the trust deficit, but also instill a stronger sense of understanding of each other's needs.
- With regards bilateral cooperation within the trilateral, the following were suggested: defence and energy cooperation for India and Russia and stronger trade and economic cooperation for India and China.
- Issues of structural nature, like China-India border dispute, needs immediate settlement in order to be able to progress on to other issues.
- India and China should cooperate more in the Eurasian region. Russia and China already have robust cooperation in the region.

Suggestions for trilateral cooperation:

- Increase collaboration amongst each other between technology entrepreneurs, scientists and geologists that work on environmental problems and natural disasters.
- More cooperation is needed between owners of small and medium businesses as that would bring the countries together at the grass roots level, also widening the scope for employment.
- There needs to be more engagement between think tanks, entrepreneurs, industrialists and scholars from among the three countries. It would provide a healthy platform for discussion of matters from varied perspectives, thus leaving scope for the genesis of a valuable range of ideas.
- Cooperate on issues related to security, terrorism and transnational crimes.
- Cooperate towards economic and humanitarian assistance.
- Cooperate in the fields of economy, energy, climate change and mass media.
- High profile joint projects like that of space-cooperation.
- Build synergy through connectivity plans. But also bear in mind the negative responses that could be generated when a connectivity passes through a contested territory.
- Develop regulatory convergence, push for paperless trade and simplify trade procedures, including customs cooperation and strengthen value chains.
- There is a need for improvement of people-to-people contact as it is at the most challenging phase.

- Need to explore more joint ventures that will strategically benefit the regional countries involved in it, such as the development of a new Iranian port at Chabahar.
- Push for physical and digital infrastructure at this time, as it would generate more global demand.
- RIC must join together to tackle issues related to cyber-attacks on encrypted government files through mutual cooperation in cyber security.
- There is a need to develop legal expertise and scholarship such that Asia can keep up with the steady evolution of cyber space and challenge western monopoly.

On regional security and terrorism:

- All must be prepared to react swiftly and coercively to counter any threats to regional security.
- Cooperation is necessary to root out 'Islamic extremism and fundamentalism'.
- The three should not only look for consensus but also have specific proposals, such as counter-terrorism operation.
- Attention must be brought to anti-narcotic trafficking and prevention of illegal smuggling.

RIC and other regional associations/cooperation mechanisms:

- Some differing views appeared here as well.
- Projects that cannot be achieved under the framework of BRICS and SCO, can be initiated under umbrella of RIC.
- There is a need to strengthen BRICS, SCO and G20 and also to preserve the Shanghai spirit.
- RIC needs to be independent from that of other multilateral forums like BRICS and SCO.
- There is a need for BRICS and AIIB related reforms. There should be an increase in connectivity projects such as the BCIM and the China-Russia Arctic Sea Route.

UN reform:

- The Russian view was – while the UNSC needed reforms, the status of the P5 members and their veto power must remain untouched.
- Chinese view was non-committal – UN needs to be defended as the prime body that maintains world peace.

BRI was a point of divergence among the three:

- The Indian side expressed its reservations regarding BRI.
- Projects like that of INSTC (International North-South Corridor), which is a joint venture are more preferable than BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) whose foundation is laid down by a particular nation as per an Indian view.
- A per Chinese view, the BRI is based on mutual benefit. The Russian view was more aligned with that of China.

Discussion on 'west'/ 'western countries:

- Discussion also veered on role of and what should be the policy towards 'western countries':
- One reminisced that RIC originated "as a counterbalance to the Western alliance".
- Some saw western countries making a last ditch towards retaining their shrinking space for domination by creating problems in the east.
- Another highlighted that though the RIC articulates a non-Western perspective, it does not have to be anti-West. The three nations need to work together with each other but also with other European partners.