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The 18th Russia, India, China Trilateral Academic Conference

22-23 April 2021

.....**Detailed Report**.....

The 18th Trilateral Conference of Russian, Indian and Chinese Scholars was held on 22-23 April, 2021 in online mode. It was hosted by the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi in collaboration with the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow & China Institute of International Studies, Beijing. The theme of the 18th RIC was ‘Challenges and Opportunities in the post-Covid International Order’.

The Chinese participants included Amb. Xu Bu, President, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing; Dr. Hu Shisheng, Director, Institute for South Asia Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, Beijing; Dr. Li Li, Deputy Director, Institute for International Relations, Tsinghua University, Beijing; Dr. Rong Ying, Vice President, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing; Prof. Ma Jiali, Director, China Association for International Friendly Contact, Beijing & Director, Centre of Strategic Studies, China Reform Forum, Beijing; Dr. Kang Jie, Assistant Research Fellow, Department for European-Central Asian Studies, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing; and Dr. Lan Jianxue, Head, Department for Asia-Pacific Studies, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing.

The Russian delegation included Prof. Alexey Maslov, Acting Director, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Professor, National Research University, Moscow; Dr. Vladimir Petrovskiy, Chief Academic Researcher, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Mr. Vladimir F. Potapenko, Adviser, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Prof. Anatoly Filippovich Klimenko, Leading Researcher, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian

Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Deputy Head, Center for Strategic Problems of North-East Asia and the SCO, Moscow; Dr. Tatiana Shaumyan, Head, Centre for Indian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; and Dr. Sergei V. Uianaev, Deputy Director, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow; Head, Center for Study and Forecast of Russia-China Relations, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.

The Indian delegation included Amb. Ashok K. Kantha, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; Prof. Alka Acharya, Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; former Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; Prof. Manmohan Agarwal, Professor, Centre of International Trade and Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Prof. Amita Batra, Professor of Economics & Chairperson, Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi; Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi; Amb. Ajai Malhotra, Chairperson, Advisory Committee, U.N. Human Rights Council, Geneva; former Ambassador of India to the Russian Federation; former Ambassador and Deputy Representative of India to the United Nations, New York; Prof. Siddiq Wahid, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; former Gulab Singh Chair Professor of Modern History, University of Jammu, Jammu; Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva, Jean Monnet Chair; Chairperson, Centre for European Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Amb. Amar Sinha, Distinguished Fellow, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, New Delhi and former Ambassador of India to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

INAUGURAL SESSION

In the inaugural session, opening Remarks were made by the leaders of the three delegations, Amb. Ashok K. Kantha (who also chaired the session), Prof. Alexey Maslov and Amb. Xu Bu. The ambassadors of the PRC and the Russian Federation to India also attended the inaugural session and made brief remarks. Mr. Naveen Srivastava, Additional Secretary (East Asia), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, who had agreed to deliver the keynote address, was unable to join and his address was delivered on his behalf by Mr Wilson Babu, Director Eurasia Division, MEA, GOI. Prof. Alka Acharya delivered the vote of thanks.

Amb. Ashok K. Kantha, welcomed the all participants to the 18th RIC Trilateral Academic Conference. He began with a comprehensive address about the importance of the RIC framework and the significance of what has been achieved in the last two decades as well as the problems and shortcomings. The RIC academic conferences commenced in 2001, with the support of the governments in Russia, India and China and in 2021 this initiative completes two decades. The academic interactions and exchanges have been rich and productive and generated excellent ideas for policy makers and the leaders at the Track One level. He also said that the participation of senior diplomats such as Ambassador Sun Weidong and Ambassador Nikolay R. Kudashev underlines the importance attached by India, Russia and China to the RIC academic dialogue.

Amb. Kantha pointed out that since the last meeting in Beijing in September 2019, momentum has been maintained among the three countries in the RIC format despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. He also pointed out that Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China had a productive meeting in Moscow on 10 September 2020, prior to which they had a virtual interaction on 23 June 2020 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the conclusion of World War II and the founding of the United Nations. He highlighted that in the meeting in Moscow, the ministers noted with appreciation the continuation of joint activities under the RIC framework, including the second RIC DG-level consultations originally hosted by India, the 17th RIC academic conference hosted by China, the third edition of the RIC young diplomats program hosted by Russia and the first online meeting of national sanitary and epidemiological services. He underlined that there is a strong commitment at the highest level in the three countries to the RIC Academic Conferences as a joint platform of three of the most important countries of the world and a shared desire to leverage its potential and efficacy. He opined that the RIC is a major factor of stability at a time of great uncertainty and turbulence in the international environment where the world is struggling to cope with the worst pandemic in the last hundred years. He also noted that the geopolitical landscape today is characterized by intensification of strategic and great power contestation, unilateralism, populism, nationalism, retreat from globalization, and problems related to regional hotspots and terrorism. He said that the global community has fallen short in its response to these challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. On the economic side, he pointed out that the global economy contracted sharply by 3.3% in 2020 and is expected to recover by 6% in 2021 as per IMF's recent World Economic Outlook. He also pointed that India may come out to be one of the fastest growing economies with growth at

12.5% though it was to be borne in mind that this forecast was made before the current and strong second wave of COVID-19 had emerged, which has led to economic activity being restricted in several parts of the country. Similarly, he said, China may achieve 4% growth while Russia stands to grow at an expected 3.8% in the current year. However, this growth would not prevent worsening of poverty and inequality in the world, due to an uneven process of recovery in the aftermath of the pandemic. The post COVID globalization scenario that is currently unfolding, said Amb Kanth, is likely to see different business patterns and models which in turn could change globalisation equations, as we know them now. He added that global value chains that extend today across multiple countries are predicted to be shorter as companies seek to lessen risks and build resilience. He suggested that the current RIC trilateral must focus on areas of convergence among the three countries by addressing differences in a constructive manner. He further noted that there is a significant measure of consensus among the three countries on the current international situation as all three countries favour multipolarity and oppose protectionism, unilateralism and external interference in domestic affairs. He highlighted that an important objective of this conference should be to come up with tangible ideas to enhance the trilateral cooperation in shaping the global and regional agenda and expand practical cooperation among the three countries by paying attention to each other's interests, concerns and aspirations. The completion of two decades of trilateral academic dialogue was a good occasion to introspect, collate and update the learnings and recommendations accumulated during the period. He suggested setting up of a joint group to bring out a publication, which would be useful source material for intergovernmental deliberations among the RIC countries as well as for scholars and the people at large. He added that Russia, India and China agree that the world is in transition but a new equilibrium is yet to emerge and the biggest international challenges today range from pandemics to terrorism to climate change, all of which are transnational in character and hence most amenable to resolution in a democratic and multipolar world. He urged the participants to collaborate during this transition period and work towards ushering an international order where the three countries recognize each other as co-equal poles, rather than seeking hierarchy or harbouring doubts about each other's intentions. He affirmed that Russia, India and China are three major countries pursuing independent foreign policies, which can work together more meaningfully to shape the regional global agenda on issues relating to security and development through trilateral initiatives. He agreed on the need for a comprehensive reform of United Nations, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with a view to making it more efficient and to increase the representation of the

developing countries. He pointed out that Russia and China have reiterated the importance attached to the status of India in international affairs and supported its aspirations to play a greater role in the United Nations. He emphasized that the RIC countries must work together to galvanize the reform process, particularly with regard to the expansion of the UNSC. He pointed out that India, Russia and China can do a lot together to promote a peaceful, stable and independent Afghanistan within the shared framework of Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process. He stressed the need to fine-tune the agenda for functional cooperation of the trilateral in a manner that avoids duplication and yet maintains the salience and identity of the RIC. He noted that it is of critical importance that a unique identity of RIC as an effective and vibrant grouping is developed. Amb. Kantha added that the RIC should consider high-profile and ambitious projects that leverage the strengths of each country and catches public imagination such as a joint R&D or Technology project. He pointed out that trilateral cooperation has been sustained by enhanced mutual trust and comfort level among the three countries. He further added that while Russia has strong strategic ties with both India and China, India and China relations have suffered setbacks since the last conference as they are passing through a period of immense stress. He noted that India-China relations have an impressive track record of achievements and yet carry the burden of accumulated differences and mutual suspicion. He suggested that structural problems in the relationship must be addressed with the objective of crafting a new *modus vivendi*. He added that it is imperative to achieve early disengagement of troops at all friction points and create conditions for de-escalation and restoration of peace and tranquillity in the border areas. He pointed India greatly values the special and privileged strategic partnership with Russia and is keen to continue to invest continuously in this relationship and give it fresh substance and momentum.

Prof. Alexey Maslov, began his remarks by noting that the year 2020 has been a tough year globally due to the outbreak of the pandemic and that it was interesting to observe the behavior of states towards one another. Prof. Maslov shared his frank assessment of the global scenario since the outbreak of the pandemic, contending that the most obvious takeaway from the experience of the global pandemic was the high level of mistrust amongst countries and between people and their governments. He further elaborated his point by stating that countries closed doors to one another, did not cooperate in developing new technologies and new ideas to fight the global pandemic. Prof. Maslov then talked about de-globalisation and the crash of formal structures such as the WHO that proved to be ineffective

in the face of a global pandemic. He also stated that regional organisations such as BRICS and the SCO proved to be inadequate in responding promptly to new threats such as the coronavirus. Against this backdrop, he called for a united RIC front not only to fight against the global pandemic but also to revamp the international organisations and re-stabilize trade. He also drew attention to the role of think-tanks in RIC countries as the pandemic not only has economic repercussions but also political implications as well. In this context, he stated that the Institute of Far Eastern Studies in Russia plays an important role in bringing forward comprehensive ideas on stabilizing the present-day situation. Lastly, Prof. Maslov talked about the danger of cyber security which is not a traditional security challenge therefore there is a need for the RIC countries to come together to discuss how these new unconventional security challenges can be conquered together. He also suggested that China could include cyber currency as part of its BRI initiative and all RIC countries could perhaps work together to form new financial banking institutions suitable to the new era in a new way. Prof. Maslov's remarks thus laid great emphasis on the need for RIC countries to be creative in fighting the challenges of the new era with new ideas, since the old ideas have so far not proved to be effective as was seen during the pandemic.

Amb. Xu Bu, highlighted the importance of standing united in the face of adversity as the primary lesson drawn from the global pandemic. He noted how the world is very closely connected and everyone across the globe is in the same boat making unity and international cooperation imperative in combating the pandemic. Amb. Xu Bu remarked that since the first RIC trilateral conference in Moscow, cooperation amongst the three countries has seen steady progress: a cooperation framework with informal meetings among the leaders of the three countries providing the political guidance has been set up; regular foreign ministers' meetings as the main mechanism and dialogues on industry, commerce and health complemented by dialogues amongst think tanks on global and regional issues has taken place over the last two decades. Amb. Xu Bu agreed with Prof. Maslov that the international order is going through profound changes and there are doubts about globalization. However, he emphasized that China believes globalization will continue strongly in the coming years. He discussed how India, China and Russia are playing an important role in international affairs as emerging economies and that they have extensive common interests and shared visions. The RIC spirit of openness, solidarity and cooperation was mentioned in the context of upholding multilateralism and addressing challenges together. Discussing the way forward, he stressed that the RIC countries need to forge further consensus, promote cooperation, send a positive

signal to the world and work together to open up new prospects for development in the post pandemic era. In conclusion, he stated that 2021 marks the twentieth anniversary of the RIC trilateral academic conference and at this commemorative moment, it is important for academics from the three countries to discuss ways of upgrading cooperation in the post pandemic era.

Amb. Sun Weidong, began by commenting on the changes in global landscape and highlighted the need for embracing unity instead of division, cooperation instead of confrontation and partnership instead of alliance. He stressed that the RIC countries are major emerging economies with significant importance in global affairs and therefore they have an important role to play in upholding multilateralism. He noted that one of the biggest lessons taught by the global pandemic is the realization that the world is an interdependent community with a shared future and therefore, multilateralism is the correct and only way to address global challenges. Amb. Sun Weidong defined multilateralism as a mechanism wherein international affairs are addressed through consultation with all sides rather than important decisions being taken by one or a few countries. He further added that true multilateralism is inclusive and cooperative rather than exclusive and divisive, therefore it is not about engaging in small circles or creating group confrontation. In this context, he quoted President Xi Jinping stating “What we need in today’s world is justice and not hegemony”. He added that the RIC countries have the responsibility to take the lead in upholding the purposes and the principles of the UN Charter and safeguarding the international system with the United Nations at its core. He also emphasized on the need to abandon ideological prejudices, hegemony and power politics in order to promote development and equality. Amb. Sun Weidong also noted that it is natural for countries to have differences but that it is important to not impose one’s own values and ideologies on other countries or interfere in the international affairs of other countries. He argued for the values of peace, democracy, development, equality, justice, and freedom as the common values for the benefit of mankind. Next, he emphasized on open development, economic recovery and sustainable development as the outbreak of the pandemic has led to the slowdown of economic globalization especially because some of the western countries are building walls and decoupling from other economies. Amb. Sun once again reiterated the role of China, Russia and India as emerging markets to uphold the multilateral trading system with the WTO at the core. Finally, in conclusion he urged the RIC countries to see each other as opportunity providers instead of competitors and to support one another as partners by enhancing cooperation in areas such as

trade and investment, digital economy, connectivity, anti-terrorism and technological innovation.

Amb. Nikolay R. Kudashev, began his remarks by stating that interaction between the RIC countries is important in shaping a democratic, just and polycentric world order. He further explained that in order to facilitate joint optimal solutions to vital problems, strengthening mutual understanding and trust is of utmost importance. He pointed to the strength of the RIC countries when they work together and discussed how they have the potential to promote a positive agenda of universal values such as multilateralism, equality and rule of international law. Prof. Kudashev stated that cooperation amongst the RIC countries is important for the security development of the Asia Pacific region and the progress of the European economic integration. He also discussed the importance of mechanisms such as BRICS and SCO in supporting Asia-centric cooperation platforms by suggesting that formats such as these stand for non-bloc approaches and advocate openness, equality and mutual respect. Amb. Kudashev talked at length about the Indo-Pacific and argued that the link between the Indo-Pacific concept and signs of movement of NATO eastwards is becoming increasingly clear. He emphasized that the best way forward for Asia is strengthening socio-economic connectivity, development of cross border transport and logistics corridors, inclusive value-added chains and trade liberalization.

Mr. B. Wilson Babu, read the keynote address on behalf of Mr. Naveen Srivastava, Secretary (East), MEA, India. He began by pointing out that RIC foreign ministers have met 17 times since their first meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in 2002 and that in recent years informal summits of RIC leaders have been held on the sidelines of G20 summits. He said that India attaches great importance to the RIC format as a platform to foster closer dialogue and practical cooperation amongst the three countries. Noting that the RIC countries together contribute 40 percent of global population, 24 percent of global GDP and 19 percent of the world's land area, Mr. Shrivastav sought to highlight how the collective leadership of RIC countries in areas such as investment, healthcare, education and science and technology can contribute not only to each other's economic growth but also to global peace, security and stability. He said that the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced several variables into an already complex and uncertain global situation, bringing unprecedented challenges to public health, food security, production and availability of consumer goods, besides pushing many communities back into poverty.

Women and children have been affected disproportionately both on economic and social fronts. He pointed that global economy has shrunk by more than 4% last year, the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On the other hand, with the game changing nature of technology, including the growth and power of big tech, new challenges are emerging in areas such as data management, data localization and data sovereignty. Mr. Shrivastava suggested that Russia, India and China, with their strong scientific and industrial capacities, could collaborate to effectively harness the emerging digital technologies for economic growth and development of the three countries as well as make a significant contribution towards mitigating the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. He pointed out that in the early days of COVID-19 pandemic, India mounted Vande Bharat Mission, an unprecedented repatriation operation to bring back stranded Indian nationals from abroad. He also added that India's domestic priorities were harmonized with global outlook of vaccine friendship initiative to supply vaccines to more than 90 countries across the world. Quoting Prime Minister Narendra Modi that, "[T]he global systems should adapt themselves in order to address the problems of today and the challenges of tomorrow", Mr. Shrivastav noted that for multilateralism to succeed, it is critical to reform the global governance systems so as to reflect the current geopolitical realities on the basis of fairness and equity. He pointed out that while India has steadfastly supported the central role of the United Nations and its specialized agencies in dealing with new and emerging challenges to international peace and security, the continued success and relevance of the United Nations will be determined by its ability to adapt to the realities of today's world which are quite different from those of 1945. The RIC countries agree that the working methods of multilateral organizations need to evolve and adapt to global challenges and India is convinced that much needed reforms of the United Nations, including its Security Council should be carried out at the earliest. He stressed that these reforms will not be meaningful without inclusion of India as a permanent member of an expanded UN Security Council. He thanked Russia for its support for India's membership in a reformed UN Security Council and expressed his hopes for receiving China's support in this regard. He further added that during India's non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council, RIC countries could explore cooperation on issues like equitable COVID relief measures, reformed multilateralism, peacekeeping and peace building, innovative technologies, cyber security, sustainable development and climate change. He pointed out that respect for the universally recognized principles of international law, including sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries and recognizing the legitimate interests of partners and promoting common good are the only way forward towards building

a durable post-COVID world order. He also pointed out that India remains committed to a rules-based transparent, non-discriminatory, open and inclusive multilateral trading system centred around the WTO. India supports the efforts to improve WTO functioning and believes that such effort should uphold its core values and basic principles while reflecting the interests of all its members, especially the developing countries. He pointed out that India feels that the reforms in WTO should reaffirm the importance of development and preserve the core values of the multilateral trading system, including special and differential treatment and decision-making by consensus. He suggested that the RIC countries could also work together to resolve the impasse in the WTO dispute settlement system. With regards to the Afghan issue, Mr Shrivastav noted that the recent decision of the United States to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and to end its military operations there by 11 September 2021, is being closely followed. He asserted that Afghan people have seen more than four decades of war and unrest and they deserve long lasting peace and development. India has been supporting the government and the people of Afghanistan in their efforts to achieve an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process and to build a peaceful, secure, united, sobering, democratic, stable, prosperous and inclusive country that exists in harmony with its neighbours. He said that ensuring that Afghanistan remains free of terrorism, violent extremism and drug trafficking is in the collective interest of RIC countries, however the situation in Afghanistan remains a cause for concern as violence and bloodshed are daily realities and the conflict has shown little sign of abatement. He pointed that the last few months have also witness an escalation in targeted killings of civil society and that 2020 marked a 45% increase in civilian casualties in Afghanistan, compared to 2019. He further noted that the prospects for peace in 2021 do not look very promising, especially with the continued involvement of foreign fighters in Afghanistan. In this context, Mr. Shrivastav quoted the External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar's remarks at the recent Heart of Asia-Istanbul Ministerial Conference in Dushanbe, as saying that "for a durable peace in Afghanistan, what we need is a genuine double peace, that is peace within and peace around Afghanistan". He suggested that it requires harmonizing the interests of all sides within and around Afghanistan and that India has been supportive of the efforts being made to accelerate the dialogue between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, including intra-Afghan negotiations. He further reminded that if the peace process is to be successful, it is necessary to ensure that the negotiating parties continue to engage in good faith with a serious commitment towards reaching a political solution. He said that India welcomes any move towards a genuine political settlement and a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire in

Afghanistan. He pointed out that a notable gain of the last two decades in Afghanistan is the democratic framework under which elections have been held through universal suffrage and also Afghanistan's achievements in sovereignty, domestic and foreign policy and protection of the rights of women, children and minorities and for all of citizens to live freely and without fear. These achievements must be protected and built upon, even as Afghanistan moves forward. He added that India remains committed to steadfastly supporting Afghanistan during this transition. He further said that India's development partnership of USD 3 billion, including more than 550 community development projects covering all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan are aimed at making the country a self-sustaining nation. He informed that the promise of more drinking water to Kabul is the latest addition. In conclusion, he said that candid and fruitful exchange of views among the participants of the RIC conference will be helpful in generating ideas for further enhancing RIC cooperation, especially in the run up to the next RIC Foreign Ministers meeting under India's chairmanship later in 2021. He wished success and good health to all participants of the Conference.

Prof. Alka Acharya's vote of thanks at the end of the inaugural session focused on the scholarly spirit and the camaraderie of the trilateral academic conference. She noted that the scholarly spirit, which had been sparked twenty years ago, has been continuously nurtured over the years by the participants and institutions that have been involved in the deliberations. Prof. Acharya, in her vote of thanks mentioned that there has been a united voice in favour of continuing this dialogue and despite having instances when the government policies have differed from scholarly assessments, all three governments continued to support the trilateral dialogue. As an academician involved very closely with the RIC dialogues for the last twenty years, Prof. Acharya noted that the RIC dialogues have a level of frankness amongst the participants that is the hallmark of the RIC spirit. She noted that the RIC group, in terms of population, geographical spread, and the weight that they carry in the world makes this dialogue significant and therefore goes beyond the differences that are inevitable among the three countries. The RIC dialogue recognises the need to see Russia, India and China at the core of any future international order since their capabilities and growing weight in world order has opened up huge vistas of cooperation. Prof. Acharya concluded the vote of thanks with a sincere assessment of the RIC conference by stating that despite having a number of creative ideas, there is a lack in terms of practical implementation of these ideas. Lastly, Prof. Acharya talked about the importance of bringing out a publication on RIC dialogues since the

RIC project has been very significant in interpreting the dynamics of the international order at different points of time.

SESSION ONE

The first session was titled **RIC and the Future of Globalization: Restructuring of the Global Economy in the Post-Covid World**. The two main themes that were identified during this session were; the role of RIC countries against the changing trends of globalization; and the restructuring the global economy and the emergence of industrialisation 4.0. This session was chaired by Dr. Sergei V. Uianaev in the absence of Prof. Alexey Maslov.

Prof. Manmohan Agarwal stated that the RIC countries have been the backbone of developing countries for a long time but over the last decade, this picture has changed as the growth rate of the RIC countries has been falling. As a result, they are not playing a role in improving the performance of the developing countries. In fact, not only has their growth rate fallen but their share of exports in GDP is also falling. Hence, their importance in the world economy is declining. He suggested that the international community has set some goals for itself such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) and in order to achieve them, the RIC countries must grow rapidly. India has lagged behind while Russia and China are ahead. Dr. Agarwal contended that this has proved that the RIC countries have not been successful in introducing systems that help other developing countries. He emphasized the fact that all three countries need to be clear about the role that this grouping would like to play in the world. In his view, the priority task would be to work towards establishing a strong institutional framework to provide financial assistance to countries facing balance of payments deficits. Some of the developing countries have a long way to go before one can discuss the 4th industrial revolution.

Dr. Vladimir Petrovskiy pointed out that the first priority at present should be to fight the global pandemic, which has had a huge impact on the global economy. He stressed on the importance of building resilience through serious risk management processes, since pandemics could recur in the future. He also discussed energy cooperation as the RIC countries represent a unique combination of energy suppliers as well as energy consumers. He raised a very important point about the climate change negotiations and stated that all

measures that cut greenhouse emissions are expensive and hence will add an additional burden on the emerging economies. For instance, rich countries could introduce carbon tariffs in the near future, which will make trade with these countries difficult for the emerging economies, therefore there is an urgent need for the RIC countries to initiate energy dialogues that will lessen the burden on the emerging economies. In conclusion, Dr. Petrovskiy reiterated the need to develop the concept of ‘resilience’ especially on energy and climate change.

Dr. Hu Shisheng, Director, Institute for South Asia Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, CIIS Dr. Hu Shisheng began by stating that in order to address the enormous challenge of fighting the global pandemic, it is imperative to work together by putting aside the cold war mentality and by focusing on the interests of the common people. He stressed that the global economy will undergo many changes in the post-Covid world: the China-US rivalry and decoupling between two major economies will definitely have an impact on the world economy, especially the Asia-Pacific industrial cluster which has so far made great contributions to the global economy. Dr. Hu raised many important questions such as: how the industrial revolution 4.0 would shape the global economy? What kind of role will the RIC countries play and how will they address the challenges of the uncertainty that global economy is currently facing? He referred to existing platforms like BRICS and SCO and stated that such platforms can facilitate economic cooperation between the RIC countries. He noted three important aspects of how the RIC countries can cooperate with one another: *First*, by jointly making endeavors to maintain the dynamics of the Asia-Pacific economic ecosystem by cementing the supply and production chains, which is currently disrupted by the pandemic and the US-China Rivalry. In order to do so, Dr. Sheng suggested two important initiatives – First, to set up RIC 2+2 dialogues and working ministerial groups of RIC in the fields of defence and industry, given the commonalities in their defence industries. Second, to set up RIC Covid-19 vaccine production, since here as well the RIC countries have remarkable capabilities. *Second*, jointly find a comfortable position in the new economy to create a shared future in the coming years, which will include the industrial revolution 4.0, cyber currency, digital economy, and carbon neutrality. *Third*, jointly improve global governance based on SCO and UN. Being major powers in Eurasia, the RIC countries have an obligation to stand up against destructive tendencies of the west. There are various areas for cooperating such as public housing, clean energy water resource, regional connectivity, poverty alleviation, violence reduction etc.

The presentation of the three speakers were followed by remarks from Dr. Li Li and Prof. Amita Batra as discussants.

Dr. Li Li observed that the first round of de-globalization happened after the financial crisis of 2008 when the enthusiasm for globalization rapidly decreased. Since 2017, the Brexit and Trump's 'America first' has further reinforced de-globalisation. The 2020 global pandemic has only worsened the situation. Dr. Li also pointed out that globalization has become highly politicized, resulting in the rise of populism in many developed countries. It was also used as a scapegoat to hide the failure of domestic governance and led to rise of protectionism and unilateralism. She noted that the trends towards decoupling would lead to a divided world that will not benefit anyone. Another important point raised by Dr. Li was that in the past globalization was depended on the complementarity that existed between production in the East and consumption in the West but since 2008, this format has become unsustainable as the rise of China has contributed to the redistribution of labour in East Asia and countries such as Vietnam are emerging as the hub of labour intensive manufacturing. China is transforming from a manufacturing to a consumption hub, thus leading to a new format of production as well as consumption, in the East. The RCEP is based on this background. As India is acting East and Russia is pivoting towards the East, there is huge scope for both to join the process of redistribution of regional division of labour. Dr. Li concluded by suggesting that RIC countries can form a joint group in this regard and find a roadmap to promote regional production networks. New institutions or mechanisms for regional economic cooperation should also be explored as leading emerging economies. Finally, she also suggested that the three countries can also cooperate under the framework of SCO.

Prof. Amita Batra began her comments on the presentations with reference to the recent IMF-World Bank meeting, where the recovery of the global economy after the pandemic was discussed. She mentioned that the main outcome of the meeting was that the process of recovery was unequal and the section of the globe that would recover the slowest from the pandemic, was the same section which was the slowest to grow even before the pandemic. In this context, she cited the economist Martin Wolf: "[t]hose who had already got something have got through the pandemic or post pandemic recovery being given back what they already had. And those who did not have much, have more being taken away from them during the pandemic." According to Prof. Batra, one of the reasons for this is that the

advanced economies had more in terms of fiscal and monetary space while the others did not. Next, she discussed the nature of the vaccine roll-out in the context of those economies that will not be able to manufacture or access the vaccine. Therefore, there is a need for RIC to focus on these inequalities because all three countries have advantages in some form or the other as far as vaccine manufacturing is concerned – China and Russia have come out with their own vaccines while India has the largest manufacturing capability. Therefore, sharing technology to produce Covid-19 vaccine is the most immediate aspect of cooperation that we can discuss as far as RIC are concerned. The second contribution from these three countries would be in resurrecting the WTO in the post pandemic global order. All three believe in multilateralism; therefore, it is important for RIC to bring a joint proposal to reform the WTO as an institution.

Overall, the first session concluded with some very important takeaways. The most popular opinion during the session was the need to cooperate with one another on vaccine manufacturing.

SESSION TWO

The second session was titled **RIC Cooperation in the Security Council**. It explored the avenues of collaboration by Russia, China and India in the Security Council, as India continues to remain a non-permanent member of the UNSC. This session was chaired by Dr. Rong Ying.

Prof. Ma Jiali began by analysing the current state of relations amongst the three countries. Regarding China and Russia, he pointed out that in recent years, the two sides have been on good terms with growing trust, understanding and strategic coordination for deepening relations further; on Russia-India ties he stated that although the relationship has remained strong, both face their own sets of challenges; and on India-China ties, he noted that while relations have experienced many ups and downs in the last few years with some serious setbacks, nonetheless, the two countries have a lot of room for future cooperation as they share several common interests and have the potential to cooperate on these shared interests through a number of influential platforms such as the BRICS, SCO, G20, and the U.N. As important members of the U.N., Russia, India and China have cooperated significantly within

the organization as well as in its subsidiaries. Next, he talked about how the three countries have the opportunity to collaborate in the UNSC and to contribute towards meaningful operations to bring about a positive change in the world. Prof. Ma Jiali argued that the three countries must promote discussions on the current international scenario in the UNSC. Amidst the drastically changing global backdrop, he deemed it crucial to analyse threats from both traditional and non-traditional sources. He contended that often superpowers have imposed their will on others, neglecting the interests of the affected countries and these smaller countries, particularly from Asia and Africa, such as Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Syria, have succumbed to the military might and will of superpowers. Prof. Ma Jiali further elaborated that wars and conflicts have destroyed the prosperous regions, severely damaging economic conditions, therefore, promoting peace and stability in these affected regions should become the primary concern of organisations such as the UN. He pointed out that China, Russia and India have similar positions in many issues, follow the U.N. charter and have preference for a UN-centred approach to address problems and thus uphold the authority of the UN and reaffirm its role. He also mentioned that the three parties support the UN peacekeeping efforts and they have played a vital role in ending conflicts as well as contributed to the post-war rebuilding of nations rocked by years of war and conflict. Prof. Ma Jiali called for urgent action to be taken regarding arms control as an essential move for the well-being of all and in the interests of promoting international peace and security, prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, biological or chemical. He explained that with advancements in technology, the risk of states and, more worryingly, non-state actors like terrorist organizations acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and other technologies have exponentially risen because of which it is crucial that countries first shift their focus from absolute protection of the state to promoting universal security of all so as to solve the problems of the arms race. He also opined that it is beneficial to opt for a diplomatic approach while dealing with nuclear use by any country rather than confronting them and imposing sanctions. Prof. Ma Jiali emphasised that the RIC countries need to push for more dialogue and action regarding counterterrorism at the UNSC because being victims of terrorism, all three should call for the early establishment of a fair, reasonable and effective international counterterrorism mechanism under the leadership of the Security Council. Continuing to speak on terrorism, he suggested that countries must be prompt in exchanging counterterrorism intelligence, and any instance of state-sponsored terrorism must be immediately discouraged and stopped; RIC should oppose all forms and acts of terrorism that target hundreds of innocent people and public places; and there can be no double standards

when it comes to terrorism. He also stated that fight against terrorism must abide by the relevant provisions in the UN charter and no one should interfere in another country's domestic affairs or even invade a country with counterterrorism intentions. He concluded by saying that the fight against terrorism must address both symptoms as well as the root causes. He explained that conflict and turmoil are the hotbeds of terrorism, while poverty and backwardness are the soil where terrorism grows and that only when the monumental issues of peace and development are addressed, when the common progress of civilizations and the common progress of mankind are promoted, the breeding grounds of terrorism are removed.

Dr. Vladimir Petrovskiy began his presentation by discussing how Russia and China are permanent members of the UNSC while India is not; but this presents an interesting opportunity for RIC to cooperate within the current agenda of the UNSC, simultaneously pushing for more reforms in apex body. Dr. Petrovskiy stressed that RIC have the golden opportunity to promote their own agenda in the UNSC, especially with regards to peace, security and other common interests. He stated that reform is critical, but the process lasts several decades and is not easy; changes in the structure of the UNSC require changes in the UN Charter, which is rather cumbersome as article 108 of the Charter mandates that changes in the Charter require support of two-thirds of the membership, in addition to the support from the permanent members of the Security Council. Dr. Petrovskiy noted that the P-5 have a consensus regarding the under-representation in the Security Council and India is one of the most favourable candidates, along with other regional powers like Brazil and South Africa therefore Russia supports increasing representation in the Security Council and endorses India's candidacy as well. He added that, China too supports increasing representation in the Security Council often advocating the inclusion of African countries in the UNSC. Dr. Petrovskiy clarified that the Russian position with regards to restructuring of the UNSC is to have 20+ members as this would help bring adequate representation without hampering the efficiency of decision-making process in the UNSC. He explained that another issue is regarding the veto power that the current permanent members enjoy; while the Chinese have proposed moving towards a 'double veto right system', which would require the dissent of two permanent members to veto a proposal, the Indian position is that the process should be more open, transparent and efficient. Dr. Petrovskiy concluded by stating that RIC have the unique opportunity to collaborate at the UNSC and it is paramount for the three sides to discuss ways on how we can expedite the reform process and bring about meaningful change and transparency in the process.

Amb. Ajai Malhotra in his presentation stated that he believes that there is a huge scope for RIC trilateral cooperation in various fields such as trade, investment, health, education, biodiversity disaster management and many more areas. However most of these sectors come under the ambit of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) while the UNSC mainly deals with the maintenance of international peace and security. He further stated that, despite having many similarities, RIC have not yet formally discussed a common position to be presented in the UNSC. Amb. Malhotra argued that it is beneficial to first informally work out the specific topics that can be pursued instead of directly delving into the broad areas in which RIC can cooperate in the UNSC.

He agreed with the points raised by the former speakers regarding equitable representation in the UNSC by increasing the number of members. He explained that about 160 of 193 member states of the UNGA support increasing the membership of both permanent and non-permanent members in the UNSC. He Amb. Malhotra acknowledged the difficulties pointed out by Dr. Petrovskiy regarding amendments in the Charter. He reiterated the points raised by Prof. Ma Jiali regarding combatting international terrorism and called for a more result-oriented and effective approach to deal with the issue of terrorism. In that context, he pointed out that it was also essential to review the working of the counterterrorism committee and the sanctions committee. He also drew attention to the fact that India has been the largest provider of UN peacekeeping services and has sustained the largest number of blue-helmet troop casualties in pursuance of the U.N.'s noble causes. Despite all this, India has not yet been invited to the UN Military Working Committee meetings, not even as an observer state, as the committee is a subsidiary of the U.N. Security Council and only includes the military leaders of the P-5 member states. In conclusion, he emphasized on other areas where RIC could collaborate in the UNSC, such as peace-building, technology transfer, cyber-security and cyberspace. He also focussed attention on the ongoing pandemic and recommended exchange of views between the countries on strategies to deal with it on a domestic as well as international scale.

The discussants for this session included Mr. Vladimir F. Potapenko, Prof. Alka Acharya, and Dr. Kang Jie. Mr. Vladimir F. Potapenko conveyed his agreement with the views presented and reiterated the need to strengthen the position of the RIC. He also called for more dialogues amongst RIC to foster further cooperation, preferably in offline mode, given the current restrictions on actual meetings. He also mentioned that Russia, India and China have a

great deal in common in the context of the UN agenda and advocated that the three countries should develop their own strategy outside of the UN and use the existing establishments within the RIC to further the RIC agenda in the UN externally. He also noted that the SCO could function more efficiently along with the United Nations and that India's position in the UNSC as a non-permanent member could help RIC expedite the collaboration between the SCO and UN. India is set to take the SCO presidency in 2022-23, and this can help put forward the RIC agenda in the SCO which can in turn ensure its implementation in the UN by virtue of the other SCO members who occupy positions in the UNGA. He also suggested organizing events jointly by the SCO and the UN in areas that would be in the interest of the global community. This would also be an excellent opportunity to showcase healthy collaboration between India and China to the world.

Prof. Alka Acharya endorsed the view that the scope for RIC cooperation in the UNSC is huge as there are many areas where we have a common understanding. She stated that RIC has the potential to bring changes in the developing world and can even be the voice of the developing world in the UNSC. It is evident that the traditional and non-traditional threats to international peace plague the developing world much more and hence presents a greater challenge to the developing world. Prof. Acharya noted that the challenge faced by the RIC countries as a team is not about the nature of problems that need to be addressed but rather the ways in which the problems need to be addressed. She also called upon the scholars to generate ideas and create position papers, which could form the basis for governments to set up task forces and take action. She also mentioned how RIC have always demanded similar reforms in the UNSC but the differences lay how the reforms were to be implemented. She also noted that, unlike the Russians who have strongly advocated India's inclusion as a permanent member in the UNSC, China hasn't made any official statement specifically promoting India's inclusion. China has argued for increasing the membership to make the Security Council more representative and bringing in more developing nations, but they have stopped short at offering any categorical support for India's candidacy. She mentioned that the lack of support from the Chinese has put some strain on Sino-Indian relations. She also spoke about how the Security Council was formed, its history and how in many ways it was an undemocratic institution. She called on Russia, India and China, who claim to be champions of democracy, to bring about the necessary changes as it is clear that the UNSC does not operate democratically in its current form. Prof. Acharya asked Dr. Petrovskiy for some more insight into the double veto and the alternatives that were being considered for

reforms. Dr. Petrovskiy responded saying that the double veto was only one among other reforms that were being considered. Others included adding new members without veto power, abstaining from vetoes when dealing with issues of utmost importance and many more. As of now, there isn't any alternative that would be accepted by all the permanent members. Prof. Acharya also raised a question on 'Expansion versus Efficiency' regarding the Security Council to all the participants. Dr. Petrovskiy acknowledged that it is a complicated issue indeed but it is certain that the UNSC currently lacks representation. He reiterated that the Russian position was to expand the Security Council to 20 states, which if carefully selected would bring adequate representation to the Security Council, without sacrificing efficiency in decision-making. Amb. Malhotra commented that neither Russia, India or China have expressed any opposition to the 'veto' power or has shown a desire to repeal the veto power of the permanent members. Thus, it is in their interest to maintain veto power but at the same time ensure it is not abused.

Dr. Kang Jie, began by iterating that China's position on the Security Council has been clear and consistent in the sense that China has always supported necessary and reasonable reforms and that China also supports the representation of developing countries in the UNSC. Dr. Kang also acknowledged the arduous process of reform of the UNSC and called for more inter-governmental negotiations to come up with a better reform package that would generate greater consensus among the member states. He mentioned that China attaches great importance to India's status in global affairs as an "emerging market economy" and a "significant developing country" and also added that China understands and supports India's ambition to play a greater role in the UN, including the Security Council and hopes to maintain close consultation with India and the other stakeholders regarding this. He called on the UN to serve as a platform for problem-solving and suggested that since the reform process is time-intensive, it would be best to deal with the most urgent issues by enhancing the capabilities of the UN. An example that he suggested was the setting up of a special agency for dealing with the current COVID pandemic and ensuring smooth supply chains for essential medical supplies, vaccines and drugs. He also called upon the RIC to take proactive steps to ensure that Afghanistan doesn't become a hotbed of terrorism after the recent withdrawal of US troops. Dr. Kang Jie also suggested establishing a working group in the UNSC with a special focus on Afghanistan. He also conveyed his agreement with Mr. Potapenko's views regarding cooperation between SCO and UN and emphasised that it would be beneficial in combatting transnational extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking.

SESSION THREE

The third session of the 18th Russia-India-China Trilateral Academic Conference was titled **RIC and the Future of Afghanistan** and was chaired by Prof. Siddiq Wahid.

Prof. Anatoly Filippovich Klimenko began his presentation by highlighting that the situation in Afghanistan is characterised by large-scale uncertainties, especially after the recent decision on the removal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan. While the US President Biden (on 14 April 2021) has declared that the removal of American troops will only begin from 1 May 2021 and will be completed by 11 September the same year, the Talibs have threatened to resume combat actions unless the US troops are not withdrawn before 1 May. Prof. Klimenko provided a brief history behind the ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan’ which was signed on 29 February, 2020. He stated that long before the Afghan peace agreement was signed in February between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan - which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban - and the United States of America, a behind-the-scene negotiations was held in Doha. In this meeting between the unofficial American representatives and representatives of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the former tried to persuade the representatives of the Emirate to agree to retain part of the foreign troops in Afghanistan. The Taliban negotiators were told that this was dictated by the US and NATO interests to counter Iran, China and Russia. The USA called on the Talibs to preserve for Pentagon and NATO a number of military bases, which was documented in a secret amendment to the agreement from February 2020 but these negotiations were not reconciled with the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Talibs considered this agreement in Qatar as their biggest victory ever. Soon they started elaborating plans on invading Kabul and the main centers of the country. It’s quite clear that the implementation of these plans will turn the Afghan capital into a field of combat with a resultant outflow of people to Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian countries.

Explaining that this forecast could turn out to be true, Professor Klimenko stressed that the inter Afghanistan negotiation is quite likely to fail largely due to the USA. Instead of trusting Afghans to perform their own process of peaceful construction, American special ambassador in the negotiations in Doha, Zalmay Khalilzad, used pressure and deception against the Talibs and also against Kabul. On their part, the Talibs insisted that the Afghan National Army and the main department of national security must be liquidated, and the Ministry of Internal

Affairs must be reformed, based on the armed forces of Talibs. Kabul objected to these measures, emphasising that it will be a betrayal of democratic victories. This contradiction in the position of Kabul and Talibs is not solved. However, the USA showed considerable concern that after the total withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the Talibs might completely capture power in the country. Professor Klimenko also highlighted the fact that General Mackenzie, General Milley and the head of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, General Miller have all expressed their opposition to Biden's proposed plan of action. Head of Pentagon Lloyd Austin has also expressed concerns that the country could be deprived of stability and has even gone on to suggest that President Biden has not taken a final decision about the timeframe for the removal of US troops. The US Defence Minister has elaborated on logistical aspects and believes that many possibilities are still open for consideration. Biden confirmed that the USA will keep track of the situation and will also keep considerable assets in the region in order to prevent threats arising out of Afghanistan. Counsellor of the White House, Sullivan said that they had an opportunity to continue to quell terrorist threats in Afghanistan even from a distance.

Questioning how we can understand this development, Prof. Klimenko asked why the Americans are removing troops from Afghanistan and saying that they will bring the main forces in Asian and Pacific region where main opponents are China and Russia as stated. It is quite possible that at the time of leaving Afghanistan, the USA can retain in the Central Asian region, some military troops as well as civil servants and those who work in Western private defense companies, including around one thousand people in special operations, which are not reflected in the documents either of CIA or Pentagon. He warned that one should be ready for this kind of exodus of Americans from Afghanistan. As regards the expansion of Talibs outside Afghanistan, much depends on external players. Leaders of Afghan radicals have no desire to fight, but their leadership cannot influence their commanders, and there are forces that want to spread jihad over the northern borders of Afghanistan as long as Washington is interested in the stability of the region. Professor Klimenko explained that analysing the crisis in Afghanistan, former ambassador of Russia to Afghanistan, Konarovsky had come to the following conclusions: (i) Regardless of the desire of the USA to remove the troops from Afghanistan and of the agreement signed, it will be hard for them to do so; (ii) the crisis cannot be solved in the near future, we will have to undertake a great deal of reconstruction in the internal political power configuration and change their influence; (iii) it is not clear what kind of future state arrangement will be reached by the involved parties; (iv) the international

community, especially the interested countries including Russia, must continue their efforts on encouraging the Central Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban to reach specific results.

According to Western experts, after the removal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, there are three possible options for Afghanistan's future: (i) the country will be divided into parts i.e. complete disintegration; (ii) there can be civil war; and (iii) most probably, the Talibs would come to power in the biggest part of the country. According to the Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, there is also no positive prediction since the state risks a deterioration in its relations with the Taliban. After some military attacks, the Talibs have stated that they do not want the withdrawal to be postponed. Therefore, the goal for Russia in the current situation is to preserve and protect its national interest, security, and also its own influence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan borders with Central Asian countries that have no visa or visa free regime with Russia. Moreover, Russia has good relations with some of them and is also responsible for their security. That is why Russia has always tried to promote the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The non-formal contest between two Afghan parties—Taliban and pro-government public organisations—is a very important step on the way to enter the intra-Afghan dialogue. Therefore, the participation of Russia, China and India in the peace-making process could really bring this dialogue to a better level.

Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva stated that Afghanistan was at a crossroads again, but compared to other processes, this was supported by almost every country in the world. The US has assured that despite exiting militarily, its diplomatic and humanitarian work in Afghanistan would continue, and the same would apply to most Western countries. President Biden has also indicated that the US would like to see other countries, particularly Pakistan, Russia, India, China and Turkey to engage further in Afghanistan. Prof Sachdeva explored what these developments really meant for India, China and Russia, individually, and also within RIC trilateral framework? He stated that it was becoming increasingly clear that the role of regional countries is likely to increase, given the US and NATO's exit.

Most regional countries, including India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and Central Asian Republics have been deeply involved in Afghanistan since the early 90's. However, in the last twenty years, their role has largely been limited to reconstruction and development activities because the US and its NATO allies largely took up security responsibilities. Only Pakistan has been

indirectly involved in security matters due to its deep linkages with the Taliban. Even in the changed circumstances, it was unlikely that any member of RIC was actually ready to be directly involved in security matters. All three countries would perhaps support any kind of security stabilisation through hardware or/and training. They may also continue or even perhaps increase their development footprint. For instance, India had developed a reasonably big development footprint in the last few years, and China and Russia have the capacities to increase their presence substantially. All three shared a common desire to have a stable Afghanistan since that would provide mutually beneficial economic opportunities to the region as also these countries. Despite India-China border tensions and Indian worries about China-Pakistan strategic ties, the evolving situation in Kabul would provide India and China some opportunities to work together. Similarly, in the last two-three years, India-Russia ties are also under some stress due to India's participation in the Indo-Pacific, the Quad, and also Moscow's growing links with Islamabad. Despite these pressures, closer Russia-China, China-Pakistan, and trusted India-Russia relations could be used constructively. In an evolving situation in Afghanistan, all of them have worked together in the Moscow format.

Apart from working with the current Afghan government, India would also have to synchronise its strategy with the other regional players. Countries like Qatar, Russia, China, Pakistan and Turkey are actively engaged in an unfolding situation. Although India is part of the 'Heart of Asia' process and also the Moscow format, it is not seriously involved in the Doha process and also in Moscow 'troika'. All major players insist on an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, however, their designs show that they include their preferred countries rather than keeping Afghanistan's interest uppermost. Despite these geopolitical realities, all players including Russia and China prefer Kabul-Taliban negotiated settlement. Islamabad is obviously useful due to its linkages with Taliban. India will also have to prove its utility beyond its development projects. This is particularly important when the US and broader Western interest in Afghanistan is waning. It is likely that diverse group of countries such as Russia, China, Turkey, Pakistan, Qatar, Iran etc. would all be influencing future outcomes. Unlike India, a few of them have reacted to American presence in Afghanistan negatively, particularly Russia, Iran and to some extent China. India still seems uncomfortable with the idea of Taliban coming back to power in one form or another. This is mainly because of the past record and also the Taliban's linkages with Islamabad. Prof Sachdeva opined that a successful negotiated settlement between Kabul and Taliban would be better than continuation of war or only a Taliban victory. In this unfolding situation, India

will have to quickly reorient its strategy. Despite Indian foreign policy orientation moving towards the US and the West, the new Afghan strategy will have to be synchronised with entirely different set of players. Any positive outcome through these formats would strengthen India's independent foreign policy orientation and also perhaps benefit Afghanistan and the entire region. If successful in Afghanistan, this kind of partnership could also be extended to all other economic integration and connectivity initiatives. This would further help Afghanistan to play its traditional role in facilitating trade and commerce through its territories.

Though there are some noticeable parallels with the situation when the Soviets left Afghanistan, it must be remembered that 2021 is not the 1990s, let alone 2001. All the gains that have been made in the last forty years with the help of international community, including strong Afghan national forces, should not be destroyed. There is a major responsibility on countries like Russia, China and India to work for a stable Afghanistan, so that there is no strategic vacuum when Western countries make their exit.

Dr. Lan Jianxu shared four points regarding RIC cooperation on Afghanistan. First, he stated that the Afghan peace process has entered a period crucial to its future and Afghanistan's six bordering countries—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—were extremely concerned about the future of Afghanistan. He explained that the first inter-Afghan negotiation was launched in Doha on 12 September 2020, in which the Afghan government and the Taliban reached an agreement on the rules and procedures for negotiation. The next stage of negotiation would feature substantive discussions with a higher level of difficulties, and so both sides need to show greater political wisdom and resolve. He contended that history has proved time and again that the Afghan issue can only be resolved by political means, and the use of force will only plunge the country deeper into war. Afghanistan's future arrangements should be broadly representative and inclusive so that all parties, ethnic groups and religious sects in Afghanistan can participate on an equal footing and share state power. The international community should fully respect the will of Afghan people and ensure an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process.

Secondly, Dr. Lan talked about China, Russia and India working together to urge foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan to withdraw in an orderly and responsible manner in order to avoid a security vacuum. On 14 April, US President Biden said that the US had completed its

goal in Afghanistan and that they would commence the withdrawal of 2000 US troops from May 1. On the same day, the Foreign and Defense Ministers of NATO member states, in an online meeting, decided that all NATO troops would also be withdrawn from Afghanistan at the same time. Dr. Lan believed that the intention of US and NATO to shirk their responsibilities and abandon Afghanistan is very obvious. Based on the ground situation in Afghanistan, the withdrawal of the NATO coalition forces will very likely bring about risks and uncertainties regarding Afghanistan's peace process. Recently a newspaper in the US reported that the director of CIA William Burns and US General David Petraeus argued that the US and NATO withdrawal could plunge Afghanistan deeper into violence, and leave the US more vulnerable to terrorist threats. Therefore, China, Russia and India should strengthen consultation on the situation in Afghanistan, coordinate their positions and play a constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue. The three countries should also jointly ensure that the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is orderly and responsible, and full support be also given to the role of SCO and contact groups. This is extremely relevant in facilitating peace and reconstruction in this country and would help the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in playing an important role.

Thirdly, Dr Lan discussed how 2021 marks the 20th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan yet the political and security problem in Afghanistan remains unresolved. He stressed that it is very likely that the withdrawal of foreign troops will lead to confusion and turmoil. The UN Secretary General in last year's report stated that the number of recorded violent incidents in October 2010 was the highest since 2007. The irresponsible withdrawal of US and NATO troops may aggravate the chaotic political and security situation there and is very likely to have a negative impact on Afghanistan's future for a very long time.

Dr. Lan's suggested that the international community, including China, Russia and India, should continue to support the Afghan security forces to strengthen their capacity building. RIC should call upon all parties in Afghanistan to respond positively to the UN Secretary General's call for global ceasefire and for ending violence. The three countries should also help Afghanistan implement their national plan called the Afghanistan Peace and Development plans, starting from 2021 to 2025. RIC should also support Afghanistan's participation in regional cooperation and connectivity; they should work together to condemn the criminal acts committed by foreign troops in Afghanistan and urge all these acts to be thoroughly investigated. The 2020 UN report showed that in the past ten years, there have

been more than 100,000 civilian casualties, about half of which were related to the US military operations.

The discussants in this session included Dr. Rong Ying, Dr. Tatiana Shaumyan and Amb. Amar Sinha. Dr. Rong Ying, reiterated the uncertainties about the future of Afghanistan shared by all three presenters, and emphasised the need for RIC to avoid a “worst-case scenario” in the region. Having said that, he stressed on the need to “manage three contradictions” arising from the announcement of the withdrawal of US and NATO troops: first, the security vacuum that the US and NATO will leave behind will be hard to fill. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the US will be leaving Afghanistan for good as there are reports that the US is working on maintaining a base in Afghanistan for “intelligence” purposes. Secondly, he brought up the role of Taliban in the political interim arrangement that is yet to take shape. Thirdly, although the Afghan issue needs to be resolved through a transition towards making it a hub for development, there is a need to manage the competition among different connectivity initiatives. Particularly important in the context of RIC is the role of Pakistan. Dr. Rong ended his remarks by stressing the role that RIC could play in Afghanistan. Dr. Tatiana Shaumyan pointed out that Afghanistan was once again in the midst of a ‘new great game’ but compared to a century ago, today the active players have changed. Under the new geopolitical situation of the rise of China, Russia and India, and the decline of the West, Afghanistan has occupied a permanent location as the area of constant interaction among powers in Western Central Asia. China, India and Russia are concerned about the growing threats of terrorist activities both inside and outside Afghanistan. Hence the three countries must join hands with Afghanistan to address the threat of terrorism as a long-standing obstacle to region’s economic cooperation and integration. However, the search for mutually acceptable ways for the three countries to solve the problem of Afghanistan is complicated by the fact that there are differences amongst RIC in their approaches to Iran and Afghanistan. After the complete withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan by September 2021, Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan are hoping to form a consensus of external governments. Some experts predict the possibility of a resumption of the ‘great game’ with participation from these countries. This model does not include India, the most important political player on the Afghan chessboard. However, it is clear that no regional consensus is possible without India’s participation. Furthermore, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed the need to include Taliban in any political settlement since “the Taliban is part of Afghan society”, and excluding any group from the process would risk the resumption of

hostilities. Moscow proposes a settlement through negotiation in which countries of Central Asia are involved in a six plus one format. There is a common position among Russia, China and India to provide assistance and support to the government of Afghanistan and take active part in the reconstruction of the country. Amb. Amar Sinha, began by stating that although American presence had created disquiet in Afghanistan, India has not opposed either US presence or its withdrawal from the country. Regarding the issue of withdrawal of foreign troops, it is a historical fact that foreign influence in Afghanistan has never been helpful for the country or the region. Amb. Sinha pointed out that the withdrawal of the US and NATO troops would only solve one part of the problem and that troubles arising from the presence of groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS will continue to remain unresolved. He mentioned that foreign influence in the region would need to be moderated and RIC are well placed to do that. More than the physical security, the danger is of the ideological spillover and therefore there is a need to address the possibility of having a moderate Afghanistan moving forward. American withdrawal in a way implies that it is “Afghanising” the problem i.e. greater responsibility is being devolved towards the Afghan side, but even then, if Afghanistan continues to remain dependant on Western aid, the kind and extent of influence that RIC would have in Afghanistan, needs to be given more thought. The other question that needs addressing is whether RIC will be able to move beyond organising forums and help Afghanistan financially. Amb. Sinha emphasised that if RIC can converge on seeing a peaceful, united, sovereign Afghanistan, which is not a breeding ground for terrorists, it could provide for a great platform for future policy formulation. Moreover, since India, China and Russia are its neighbouring countries, SCO could be a perfect fit as all its member countries have direct interests in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Iran is another important player in Afghanistan, perhaps even more than Pakistan.

India’s position according to Amb. Sinha, is to continue its support to Afghanistan’s government and its institutions, and it is likely to remain so in its future policies towards Afghanistan. In order to have a peaceful Afghanistan, it is also imperative for India to not look at Afghanistan only from a strategic point of view, but as a huge humanitarian issue, which will have strategic consequences for India if not played right. Therefore, RIC will have to deal with the issue gently, by respecting the wishes of the Afghan people. Amb. Sinha argued that the American solution of creating an interim government as a condition for their departure could be seen as giving undeserved credit to Taliban. Although Taliban is acknowledged as part of the equation, the foreign ministers of India and Iran have expressed

their opposition to Taliban controlling the government. Ultimately, the wishes of the Afghan people need to prevail, and not through coercion. RIC can also play an important role in bringing about a critical change, that is, unity among political forces in Afghanistan. He concluded his remarks by stating that before doing away with the current political system and moving towards an interim government, it is very important that the basis of the future governance structure is first created; this has to come from within Afghanistan and cannot be imposed from outside - a lesson, said Amb Sinha, that Americans failed to learn in twenty years.

CONCLUDING SESSION

The concluding session was chaired by Prof. Alka Acharya. Participants in the concluding session included Dr. Sergei V. Uianaev, Dr. Rong Ying, and Amb. Ashok K. Kantha

Prof. Alka Acharya, commenced the concluding session by welcoming the participants to weigh in with their ideas for RIC cooperation and stated that one of the hallmarks of the RIC dialogues is the fact that participants have conceptualised the trilateral cooperation in ways that are very far reaching. Many visionary ideas have come out of these conferences, some of which have been taken up by policy makers. Prof. Acharya noted that these ideas may not have been implemented exactly as they were conceptualised but they definitely helped in opening new channels and scope for cooperative exercises. The leaders of the three delegations then were requested to give their final remarks.

Dr. Sergei V. Uianaev, stated that even after much discussion on sectoral corporation, no results were yielded during the past year. He recalled that in order to promote RIC sectoral cooperation, four dialogue platforms were organized at the turn of 2007-2008, namely, Agriculture, Disaster Management, Health, and Medicines. Business forums were also organized for the same and progress on these four tracks had been fairly consistent, but of late these meetings have not been taking place. Currently, communication between foreign ministers remains regular but with a decline in conversation about sector-specific cooperation.

There are several reasons for this decline, but the important and the primary one is that the parties have not managed to truly develop an integrated agenda that would involve all sides

investing equally. A similar group consisting of India, South Africa, and Brazil (IBSA) exhibited how sectoral cooperation can be pushed. In IBSA, 16 areas of sector cooperation were established, including agriculture, environment protection, transport, and investment. Apart from these, joint working groups were also established. Within the framework of foreign ministries of IBSA, mechanisms of national coordinators were also established with the aim to cooperate with the national ministers and departments involved in sub-projects. In some areas, specialized joint financial funds were also created. Although there has not been a major success so far, IBSA's their experience in terms of setting up the organizing mechanisms, can be helpful to RIC.

Dr. Uianaev concluded by saying that in order to promote sectoral cooperation, RIC need to find a natural convergence of interests. Furthermore, focused analysis to provide incentives for mutually beneficial cooperation, should be conducted. After formulating these incentives, they should be organized and implemented both technically and financially. The energy sector has much potential for a natural combination of interests. Within RIC, there is a need to unite efforts and make them more effective in fighting the pandemic. Not only should the three countries join capabilities in manufacturing vaccines and medicines, but also in helping each other overcome the difficulties created by the pandemic. Some aid can be provided along bilateral lines. There can be two ways in which the possibilities of more effective cooperation on the platform of the Security Council can be explored. One is the issue of UN reform, which is undisputably the need of the hour. Second is the fight against terrorism and managing regional hotspots like Iran, Middle East, and Afghanistan. Dr. Uianaev then reiterated the points made by previous speakers about how it is not easy to guarantee internal peace in Afghanistan, even if RIC efficiently unite their efforts. This is because of the presence of different groups inside Afghanistan. The real risk is the possibilities of intensified terrorist attacks on RIC.

Dr. Rong Ying spoke about the key takeaways from the trilateral conference. The first major takeaway was that while the spirit of the RIC should be embraced, efforts should be made by the three countries to become more proactive and ambitious. In times when the world is undergoing many dramatic transformations, if RIC work together, it can make a difference to the fast-changing world. Secondly, Dr. Ying talked about the ways in which the interactions of RIC can be managed with bilateral relationships. As bilateral relations between India and China are complicated, it is quite possible that this problem persists even 20 years later.

However, even with such complications, RIC trilateral interaction, is likely to help consolidate and promote bilateral ties. Thirdly he observed that there are many common interests shared by the RIC countries, but the question as to how RIC can stand out amongst all the regional organisations, is a question worth exploring. Finally, he made a strong plea for encouraging the younger generation to be involved in the study and exploration of RIC dynamics and setting up young scholars exchange programs amongst the three countries.

In his concluding remarks, Amb. Ashok Kantha conveyed his thanks to the Russian and Chinese delegations for making this conference productive and fruitful. There was a significant measure of consensus on the current international situation with all three countries favouring multipolarity and multilateralism, opposing protectionism, and external interference in domestic affairs of countries. Although there were some differences on issues such as the Indo-Pacific, they did not compromise the quality of discussions. Amb. Kantha stated that RIC, in its nature, stands apart and has received complete government support in all three countries. These dialogues have generated ideas and recommendations that have fed into the inter-governmental processes. Adding to the takeaways by Dr. Rong, Amb Kantha stated that the RIC project is a significant factor of stability in a turbulent world. Though all three countries favour multilateralism, trilateral structures also promote the international agenda, and RIC fits in very well in the approach. The challenge now lies in further invigorating the trilateral mechanism and giving it a sharper and clearer identity. While RIC recognized as a vital grouping of major countries, its development is still a work in progress. Identifying core areas for collaboration and being clear on what the RIC stands for as a group is imperative. Amb. Kantha stated that duplicating the work of SCO and BRICS must be avoided. He pointed out that there is a deficit as far as sector-specific cooperation is concerned and so far, there are no projects that can be identified as a RIC initiative, therefore track one colleagues should be encouraged in this regard. Commenting on the effects of bilateral relations on the health of the RIC, he stated that there is no doubt that comfortable bilateral political ties will help the trilateral function more effectively but at the same time, difficulties at bilateral levels should not suspend RIC collaboration. He stated that the greatest challenge that humanity is currently combating is the Covid pandemic, and therefore a trilateral agenda can be developed on this particular challenge. All three countries have been significant beneficiaries of globalization but now are under attack due to the pandemic. It is quite likely that the post-pandemic globalization will see significant changes, especially in global value and supply chains, and therefore the three countries should collaborate and study

the new emerging patterns of globalization. Lastly, Amb. Kantha talked about the common stand that all three countries have on reforms in the UN and WTO. He mentioned that in the recent past, WTO has been undermined severely, including the weakening of its dispute settlement mechanism, and therefore it is essential that RIC take a joint step to reinvigorate WTO.

Prof. Maslov, as the leader of the Russian delegation also expressed his thanks and announced that in keeping with the past practice of rotation, the 19th conference would be hosted by the IFES, RAS and extended an invitation to the partner institutions, expressing the hope that it would take place with actual – not virtual – participation. The 18th Academic Trilateral Conference was concluded by the Chair, thanking Prof. Maslov for the invitation and with appreciation towards all the participants and the ICS organising team.

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