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RIC's Historic Mission in Global Restructuring

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I am delighted that the Russia-India-China (RIC) Academic Forum is holding its 21st Conference today in New Delhi. I warmly welcome you. At the outset I wish to dedicate my address to the memory of Academician Mikhail Leontyevich Titarenko (1934-2016), long time Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, and pay tribute to him for what has now become a historic initiative he had taken in the year 1999 to give shape to this idea and steer it throughout till his passing. Following Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov's call (incidentally also an Academician of the RAS) for Russia, China and India to come together, Academician Titarenko visited the Institute of Chinese Studies in 1999 and discussed the idea. It was my privilege to receive him as the Director of ICS at that time along with my colleagues Mira Sinha-Bhattacharjea, Giri Deshingkar, G P Deshpande, Patricia Uberoi , Alka Acharya, Ambassador Vinod Khanna and C V Ranganathan. We then contacted our common friend Professor Ma Jiali of China Institute of Contemporary International Studies.

A founding workshop was hosted by the ICS in 2000 where scholars from the three countries took part. It was agreed to pursue this initiative. The support of the three governments was critical to go forward and fortunately we got the necessary go ahead. I thought the present generation of scholars should know this history. On the Chinese side the locale shifted from CICIR to China Institute for International Studies (CIIS) a few years later. Some years ago the Institute of Far Eastern Studies was reorganised as the Institute for China and Contemporary Asia (ICCA). Now this historic initiative is carried forward jointly by ICCA, CIIS and ICS with laudable cooperation in a sustained way. Amb Vinod Khanna led our initiative for many years and Alka Acharya has been the key scholar who has steered it throughout. The vast scholarship and political vision of Academician Titarenko must be celebrated with gratitude.

Friends, it is widely believed that BRICS is the outcome of the coinage of the British economist Jim O'Neill, then the Chief Economist of the Goldman Sachs in his 2001 paper, "Building Better Global Economic BRICs". It is forgotten that already processes of cooperation were in action involving RIC. Also relations between India and South Africa experienced a fast development with Nelson Mandela in power in the post-Apartheid period. So was Brazil's relations with South Africa. An IBSA Forum first informally and later formally had also been evolving. We at Delhi University's Developing Countries Research Centre and JNU's School of International Studies participated in many of the academic programmes involving various combinations of these countries. It is the convergence of the two processes of RIC and IBSA that ultimately took shape as BRICS.

This academic conference of RIC acquires special significance as it closely follows a landmark BRICS Summit in New Delhi in September with India as Chair. A consensus based Declaration, nearly 400 meetings in 30 Indian cities on specific issues of cooperation and

two highly significant bilateral meetings, India-China and Iran-UAE were among the highlights. In the context of the current world crises and the response of BRICS to most of them it has become imperative for RIC to consciously play its critical role in global affairs keeping its historical mission at the centre. This is significant as the next BRICS Summit will be held with China as Chair.

RIC's Mission of Global Restructuring not just Global Rebalancing

It should be noted that the New Delhi Declaration of BRICS in paragraph 16 recalled the general principles adopted by the Bandung Conference of 1955 and declared that "Bandung Spirit serves as a reference in the pursuit of a fairer, more inclusive and representative multilateral system''. That links the BRICS movement to the Bandung agenda of decolonization and building a new equitable and just global order in the postcolonial world. That involved 'restructuring' of power relations in global financial, economic, technological and cultural processes to make them more equal. However, as the neoliberal era unfolded in the post-Soviet period, this process was interrupted and the effort of the Western powers was to offer place to the rising powers such as China and India in their high table and carry on. That was 'global rebalancing' i.e. accommodating the rising powers in the prevailing global system and retaining the essence of the unequal trade and finance system. That is the G-7 agenda and through the mechanism of the G-20 they try to incorporate the rising economies within the existing order with minor adjustments.

BRICS on the other hand has the G-77 agenda of 'global restructuring' for building a New International Economic Order. BRICS countries should use the G-20 forum to advance the interest of the Global South. But the political and economic pressures of the US and other G-7 countries make it difficult to pursue that agenda.

President Donald Trump has gone ahead in a different direction reversing even the rules of the prevailing economic order by asserting the power of an imperialist hegemon using its superior military, economic and technological strength. By imposing tariffs, launching military attacks, declaring a sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere, exercising control over technology transfer in high-tech items, reversing environmental policies and totally altering policies on immigration he has created a new set of challenges for the rest of the world. His steps are not just personal eccentricities of a peculiar leader, but has a social base. His socially and politically conservative, internationally interventionist policies and transactional economics also echo in Europe and in many other parts of the world. In these circumstances in order that BRICS is able to be effective, the RIC countries have a new responsibility.

RIC's Global Role

Russia, India and China as three large neighbouring countries are great civilizations that have gone through great revolutions and anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggles. Therefore, from the perspective of Global Restructuring, RIC has to clearly affirm its opposition to hegemony in every sphere. Their self-perception as rising powers has to clearly distinguish themselves from both the ancient empires, imperialist and colonialist powers of the past three hundred years as well as the neo-colonial, hegemonic powers of the contemporary world. Their newly acquired economic, technological and military strength has to be placed in the postcolonial context and the liberation perspective of Bandung. Their growing power should be used to meet the challenge of hegemonism

through promoting a multi-polar world on the one hand and welfare and progress of people of their own countries and the whole world in a framework of mutual cooperation. It is based on the assumption that no form of hegemonism and neo-colonial domination by any country over other countries and regions would be tolerated in the modern world. The defeat of the US in Vietnam in 1975, in Afghanistan in 2023 and the successful resistance of Iran to US-Israel aggression – another case of defeat of the US are among the glaring examples of the new era of freedom of peoples and nations in the contemporary world. Equality of nations and peoples is the basic premise enshrined in the UN Charter and the rationale for BRICS. But operation of big power politics and diplomacy has often crippled the UN on crucial occasions to establish peace. BRICS was expected to emerge as an effective instrument of peace, development and democracy in world affairs. In the recent years there are also signs of deadlock and compromises as was evident on the issue of Israeli genocide in Gaza and the US-Israeli aggression on Iran. RIC countries too may face constraints due to the nature of their relations with the US and Israel. But RIC also opens opportunities for exercising strategic alternatives for them. This is where RIC has to proactively take steps for promoting peace and justice in conflict situations. RIC has to enable BRICS and other organizations such as SCO and above all strengthen the UN and its organs to perform that role of global restructuring. A reformed UN will definitely be more effective.

The whole world is troubled by the aggressive initiatives of President Trump. His vision of maintaining US superiority has a dreadful scenario of arranging spheres of influence among the rising powers. That this will be resisted at every level through small, medium and big countries and groups is the lesson from history. RIC vision has to be reaffirmed in the framework of equality, mutuality and independence of all nations and peoples.

A Note of Hope

The RIC agenda of cooperation has a wide and impressive range - from security, economy, environment, technology, energy and so on. What has to be emphasized is that on all these issues including AI and Pandemics, the US and G-7 have a definite perspective which has colonial origins and neoliberal thrust, which is very different from that of the G-77. RIC has to ensure a paradigm shift so that alternative, liberated perspectives on all these issues are articulated in concrete ways. Thus decolonization of knowledge is absolutely central at a time when there is a recolonization of knowledge through the compulsions of the IT and AI in the hegemonic global political economy. This requires vastly increased exchange of scholars, joint research projects in natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, building more high quality research institutes in the three countries and expansion of learning of each other's languages from school level onwards.

I am hopeful that RIC Academics will dedicate their collective work to creating an intellectual base for Global Restructuring in order to create a new world.

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