

Chapter 8

Russia-India Relations: Strategic partnership put to the test?

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Introduction

While rising powers (some are in the so-called Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa – BRICS - grouping) have widely been expected to challenge or perhaps even initiate new international norms¹, China and India have both been relatively cautious in challenging a set of emerging liberal norms that might question sovereignty. Russia, in contrast, has often taken the lead over key disputes such as Kosovo and Iraq. It is Russia that increasingly proposes alternative ideas of global order, focused not so much on ideas of multipolarity (usually conceptualised as democratization of the world order), but on new forms of regionalism. In this conceptualization, hegemonic control by Great Powers in their own spheres of influence is viewed as both legitimate and as an essential element in the construction of a new post-Western world order. However, there is clear tension between the two concepts, as greater regionalism might threaten Russia's position as one of the poles in the multipolar order.

Unlike realist perspectives, which tend to the pessimistic, Andrey Makarychev suggests that the Russian view of multipolarity is a more optimistic one.² Others, like Pavel Baev, argue that Russia has now discarded multipolarity 'as much too simplistic but in its stead nothing more sophisticated was adopted'.³ Yet the emergence of the so-called BRICS certainly initially appeared to signal the transition of power away from the unipole towards a greater diffusion of power – a multipolar world. At the same time, one can also question the nature of such a shift, given the robustness of US primacy. The BRICS have very different notions of power and India, in particular, prefers to emphasize its identity as a peace-loving nation, only to some extent challenging the 'hegemonic practices of the great powers of the twentieth century'.⁴ As BRICS powers rise, however, the onus is on them not only to take on global responsibilities, but further, 'it is on the basis of their identification with and preponderance within a region, and their willingness to provide at least some of the public goods on which the region's cohesion and well-being depends, that emerging powers are *emerging*'.⁵ Given Russia's ambition to maintain great power status, its approach to regionalism is therefore to see regions as 'poles'.⁶ In this conceptualization, China and India would exist as separate poles.

This chapter discusses a number of thematic areas and issues that arise when thinking about Russian-Indian relations in the context of a potentially emerging multipolar world and explores how this relationship might contribute to such a world. Firstly, the chapter looks at the specificity of the idea of multipolarity within the Indian and Russian political contexts and pinpoints some of the areas of convergence and difference in the two states' material and normative approaches to building a polycentric world order.¹ Particular attention is paid to the twin norms of non-intervention and Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The BRICS grouping is highlighted as an important global advocacy forum for multipolarity, which illustrates both their approaches to a multipolar order – now within a multilateral, as opposed to bilateral, policy setting – and how they use this setting to pursue their goals as aspiring major powers *vis-à-vis* the West. Next, we explore the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as arguably one of the regional centres of unfolding multipolarity, where leading 'poles', including Russia, China and, to some extent, India, seek to challenge American hegemonic power in the region of Eurasia and thus promote

¹ We have borrowed the term 'polycentric world order' from Russian officials, who use it interchangeably with the term 'multipolar world order'. The two expressions are thus used here as synonyms.

regional security by emphasising Westphalian norms. Finally, we examine Indian and Russian power ambitions in the Asia-Pacific and the impact of their interplay on the regional balance of power in the context of a hegemonic US and a rising China. Conclusions will then follow.

The idea of multipolarity

In order to gauge if, and to what extent, the Russian-Indian relationship contributes to the emergence of a multipolar world, we should look at how exactly both sides engage with the concept of multipolarity and what place the latter occupies in their respective foreign policies. The idea of multipolarity has been the cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy doctrine since the mid-1990s, when the failure to integrate into the post-Cold War global liberal order prompted Russian elites to revisit their country's international priorities and push for the end of Western-led unipolarity.⁷ The domestic grievances of the 1990s, caused by failed democratic reforms and aggravated first by NATO's enlargement and, later, its actions in Kosovo, led to perceptions of Western hypocrisy and threats to security among Russian leaders. Russia's drive to balance the hegemon was fuelled by a sense of betrayal by the US and its allies, who, in Moscow's view, took advantage of Russia's post-Cold War weakness and engaged in unilateral actions that undermined Russian national interests and security.⁸

Multipolarity is thus principally a political project pursued by Russian elites with the aim to restore Russia's status as a great power *vis-à-vis* the US – a project to assure its security and defend its national interests. Russia's vision of multipolarity and its restored great powerhood, however, is aimed at containing not only the US as the current sole superpower, but also, implicitly at least, China as its potential successor, as well as at preventing the emergence of a bipolar system with China and the US as its protagonists. Since the 2000s, Russia's calls for a polycentric world order have intensified in response to, among other things, EU eastward enlargement and the US bypassing of the UN to intervene in Iraq, along with a foreign policy heavily inspired by neoconservative democracy promotion projects that appeared to extend to (in Moscow's eyes) 'colour revolutions' in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Examples include the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine; importantly, Moscow has now included the Arab Spring in this appellation – they are all of a piece in the Russian view. Russian leaders maintain that they fought a proxy war with the US in the 2008 border confrontation with Georgia and that they are now engaged in a similar battle with the West in neighbouring Ukraine, following the latter's pro-Western demonstrations of 2013-2014. Integral to Russia's efforts in curbing American power and building a multipolar world has been Moscow's continuing insistence on the primacy of international law and respect for sovereignty,⁹ as well as the key role of the UN in the collective management of the international system.¹⁰

Central to Russia's realist view of the US as a self-serving hegemon with unlimited power ambitions is the belief that the US - and the wider West in general - advance their geopolitical interests and spread their influence under the guise of liberal values and soft power. They believe the US do this via democracy promotion (for example, during the Arab Spring) and promoting the R2P, which it sees as indistinguishable from old-style humanitarian intervention¹¹ (as was the case with Libya).¹² Russia accuses Western governments of imposing their will on other states by using democracy and human rights rhetoric.¹³ According to Russian policy makers, this liberal ideology allows the US and its allies to interfere, often indirectly and covertly, in other states' domestic affairs, thereby ensuring regime change by ousting unfavourable governments.¹⁴ In this light, the 'regime changes' in Russia's immediate neighbourhood and sphere of 'privileged interests' – i.e. CIS countries,¹⁵ where apparently democratic protests have resulted in pro-Western governments – are seen as the most damaging to Russia's national interests.

Significantly, in Russia's view, American unilateralism is also largely to blame for inspiring or even instigating anti-government popular protests inside Russia itself in 2011-2012, thereby undermining the Russian state and its sovereignty. The upheavals in Ukraine in 2013-2014 have conjured up the ultimate 'enemy at the gates' image in Russian political circles, thus leading to the most bitter confrontation between Russia and the US since Cold War times, including seizure of territory (Russia's taking of Crimea), the use of sanctions and an all-out information war.¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that Russia's multipolarity project goes beyond crude power politics or balance of power. It is also a normative project meant to challenge the Western-led global normative order and its liberal foundations.¹⁷ As such, it contributes to Russia's soft power and therefore its status as a major power centre. Firstly, by promoting multipolarity, Russian leaders claim to be forging a new – fair and democratic – world order based on sovereign equality of states and mutual *a priori* recognition of their interests, as opposed to allegedly dictatorial unipolarity led by the US.¹⁸ A democratic international system, in Russia's political imagination, would see a number of equal centres of power ('poles') cooperate and manage international politics in a 'concert',¹⁹ guided by their unconditional regard towards each other and their respective spheres of influence and security concerns,ⁱⁱ regardless of their domestic normative leanings and preferred political models.²⁰ A single power would not be allowed to dominate the international scene and thus steer international relations in a direction consonant with its intrinsic principles and values, by imposing the latter on other states as a self-proclaimed moral leader. Thus, Russia's multipolarity is essentially a global normative order built on a lack of external normative convergence or conformity, made possible through acceptance of normative diversity of countries and thus their normative equality: i.e. a pluralist, rather than solidarist order.ⁱⁱⁱ The chief norm, therefore, governing such an order ostensibly grounded in global justice, and its fundamental value, is the principle of sovereignty.^{iv} Secondly, Russian diplomats emphasise the importance of multipolarity as a more stable and secure international system. Such a system would make for a safer and more peaceful world, one built on global collective leadership and responsibility and immune from America's supposedly irresponsible, unrestrained and dangerous unilateralism, which only creates chaos and conflict in places like Iraq, Libya and Ukraine.²¹

Like Russia, India has been keen to usher in a multipolar world based on global justice and a more equal distribution of power, a fairer international system promoting 'inclusive globalisation' that would be advantageous to developing countries like itself and enable it to secure its interests.²² For India, multipolarity is both a means to attain major power status and a concept through which to make sense of its newly acquired profile as an emerging power, achieved thanks to its impressive economic performance since the 1990s. India's discourse of multipolarity is thus closely linked to the idea of development and domestic growth.²³ These are both prerequisites to ensuring India's role as one of the new centres of power and the much sought-after benefits that it hopes to reap as a result of multipolarity. There is a strong emphasis among Indian leaders on the relationship between development, security and national power.²⁴ So, as part of their multipolarity agenda, Indian policy makers have been engaging with global economic institutions - such as the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) - as well as new multilateral forums (such as the G-20). This is done in an effort to challenge and reform the international liberal economic and financial architecture and thus promote their country's development goals (e.g. by claiming more decision-making power at the IMF and the World Bank).²⁵ By the same token, India has been pursuing relationships with all

ⁱⁱ Such international 'democracy' would, however, be unfair and undemocratic to 'non-poles', and especially those of them that would find themselves within the poles' spheres of influence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps Russia would be advocating and supporting a solidarist world order if the latter were in agreement with its values and ideas and thus secured Russia a much-coveted position of a great power.

^{iv} The sovereignty value, however, is clearly at variance with Russia's advocacy of a democratic world order, which presupposes violation of the sovereignty of those states that happen to be within great powers' spheres of influence.

major powers ('poles'), including Russia and the US, with a view to harnessing cooperation for its economic, development and security purposes.

The above policy of 'strategic autonomy'²⁶ and equidistant relations with other – actual or potential – 'poles' for the sake of development and security is what sets India apart from Russia in its quest for multipolarity. To be fair, until recently, Russia was keen to pursue a similar – 'soft' – multipolarity strategy, seeking to balance out its on-going economic and security affairs with the West against engagement with new rising powers like the BRICS, especially China, as part of Russia's ambitious 'turn to the East' policy. However, the crisis in Russian-Western relations from 2014 onwards has shown that 'hard' security issues and classic power politics dominate the Russian agenda on multipolarity. While India's approach to a multipolar world is about maximising development opportunities and power through engagement with all, Russia's approach is ultimately about defending geopolitical interests and securing power by assertively balancing the US and its allies²⁷ – even if this has an economic cost. For example, for Russia, the 2008 global financial crisis was not so much about a real chance of an IMF reform – as it was for India – but was rather yet another opportunity to rebuke the US for being a selfish, irresponsible unipole. In their pursuit of multipolarity Russian leaders are increasingly preoccupied with spheres of influence, sovereignty and Russia's strategic vulnerability in the face of overwhelming Western power. It would be fair to say that any display of the West's hegemonic power in the world – as was seen with the unilateral American airstrikes in Syria in April 2017 – is bound to evoke in Russia geopolitical sensitivities and activate balance of power thinking. This is not least owing to Russia's identity as a former superpower in the Cold War and, in the eyes of Russian policy makers, multipolarity is about *regaining* Russia's international status *vis-à-vis* the West (in contrast to India gaining major power status for the first time). It is also worth remembering that Russia's 'wake-up call' for multipolarity was the unexpected development of NATO enlargement and a perceived Western encroachment on its strategic interests and security, which has made the issue of trust between Russia and the West ever more intractable.

India, on the other hand, although historically suspicious of Western powers and their influence, is unlikely to want to balance the US in its own neighbourhood of South Asia, for example in response to America's ties with Pakistan.²⁸ Besides, Indian policy makers need the US to contain China. On the whole, the benefits of cooperation with the US are all too important for India.²⁹ So it has been unwilling to support its other partner, Russia, in the latter's confrontation with the West over Ukraine and Crimea.³⁰ India's neutral and cautious position on the conflict, couched in general terms, fundamentally reveals a desire not to take sides and not to get involved in the US and Russia's internal row.³¹ Indian officials have striven to keep India's foreign affairs unaffected by the two states' bilateral relations and thus to continue to retain both as strategic partners. India's official position essentially draws on its basic foreign policy principles, grounded in the idea of non-alignment, without favouring or condemning either external party to the conflict.³² It includes calls that all parties involved in Ukraine resolve the conflict peacefully and on mutually acceptable terms, statements against the use of sanctions as a tool of foreign policy and against Russia's international isolation (e.g. prior to the G-20 meeting in Brisbane in 2014) and abstention from UN General Assembly resolutions denouncing Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea.³³ At the same time, it should be noted that India's pragmatic stance on the Ukraine crisis has been welcomed by Russian elites – for lack of any explicit support otherwise. Interestingly, however, Russian tensions with the US might not only signal a continuation of India's neutrality, but also lead to the latter's desire for even greater cooperation with the US, in response to Russia's pursuit of even closer ties with Chinese leaders in the aftermath of the conflict with the West.³⁴

Another element of India's multipolarity agenda has been UN reform and efforts to obtain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC).³⁵ This is where India's power ambitions

are arguably at odds with those of Russia. Russian policy makers have so far expressed guarded and only general support for India's candidacy as a permanent member of the UNSC and are in no haste to push for actual reform³⁶ – much to India's displeasure.³⁷ Moscow fears an expanded UNSC would dilute its own power and standing there and would be less effective as a global body in general. This position clearly runs counter to Russia's rhetoric of multipolarity and the equality of leading powers in a democratic world order, to whose group it also assigns India.

Non-intervention and Responsibility to Protect

At a global level India has strongly opposed an increasingly interventionist international community, through concepts such as humanitarian intervention, operationalized in the context of Kosovo in 1999, and later in the attempt to move away from ideas of humanitarian intervention with the acceptance of a formalised doctrine of R2P. Although India formally agreed to the concept of R2P as proposed at the UN World Summit in 2005, it has been reluctant to see the norm translated into practice, particularly where it involves military action without a UN mandate. Jaganathan and Kurtz demonstrate how this stance has shifted over time, as a result of particular political coalitions at home and key personalities in its diplomatic corps.³⁸ Thus, India moved from a very cautious position on R2P over Libya to a somewhat more softened stance on Syria, in part due to domestic pressure to support ordinary Syrians.³⁹ Yet, despite policy shifts, a strong commitment to sovereignty remains central to Indian policy at a global level.

At the same time, although India shares with Russia such principles as respect for sovereignty, non-intervention and non-interference (both actual and verbal) in other states' domestic affairs, including democracy promotion,⁴⁰ it has no desire to bring those up in its relations with the US and thus challenge the Western normative hegemony head-on. Indian policy makers do not want these norms and principles to affect India's cooperation agenda with the US. As C. Raja Mohan points out, India has always been ambivalent about non-intervention, as its position has been often driven by the realist logic of national interest rather than inviolable foreign policy principles.⁴¹ For example, India's abstention from UNSC Resolution 1973 on Libya in 2011 demonstrated not so much an anti-Western stance, but rather a desire, among other things, to avoid angering its substantial Muslim population by appearing to support Western interventionism.⁴² Other studies argue that India's objection to humanitarian intervention and foreign interference in general is rooted not in the overwhelming fear of America's hegemonic power and its threat to security but in India's overall culture of pluralism, neutrality and non-violence.⁴³ This is further reinforced by a deep scepticism about the effectiveness of the use of force in international relations.⁴⁴ Similarly, far from being a sign of anti-Western sentiment, India's cautious and extremely balanced position on the Arab Spring in general was arguably determined by its economic, political and security interests in the region (including the safety of its expatriate population), which resulted in an absolute preference for overcoming the strife and restoring stability as soon as possible.⁴⁵ Besides, in contrast to Moscow, New Delhi is most likely sceptical about the premise of Western covert involvement in, and engineering of, events like the Arab Spring or the 'colour revolutions' in the CIS. If anything, India, as a peace-loving and hegemony-averse state, might be uncomfortable with Russia's advocacy of spheres of influence and its interference in the Ukraine crisis and seizure of Crimea as a practical realization of this advocacy.⁴⁶

BRICS

Russia and India's different approaches to multipolarity are reflected in their distinct, albeit also overlapping, views on BRICS and their roles in this grouping. For Russian leaders, the informal BRICS association is a representation and the embodiment of the multipolarity ideal. Russia views BRICS as a model global forum where different states and civilisations, irrespective of their values and development paths, can engage in dialogue and find solutions to international issues based on equality, respect and mutual interests.^v As the ultimate manifestation of multipolarity, which is proclaimed a *fait accompli*, BRICS thus serves to help Russia leverage its power against the US and its allies and thus strengthen its position *vis-à-vis* the West as a great power.⁴⁷ The BRICS' implicit description as the great powers of the future also contributes to this endeavour. As a result, Russian policy makers have been the most ardent champions of the grouping and have gone to great pains to ensure its presence and relevance on the international stage.⁴⁸ One of the indications of BRICS' importance to Russia is the latter's formulation of its own Concept of Participation in BRICS, which sets out Russia's priorities and objectives in the group.⁴⁹ The task of maintaining BRICS' international relevance has become especially important in the light of Russia's conflict with the West over Ukraine, its suspension from the G-8 and further Western attempts to isolate it internationally. In the eyes of Russian elites, BRICS has proven a genuine shield against the latter. Members of the Russian ruling class have gone as far as to say that BRICS is now much more important than the G-7, in terms of both representation and legitimacy.⁵⁰ However, the recent conflict with the West has also seen Russia try to politicise the informal grouping and push for its greater institutionalisation,⁵¹ which has not been welcomed by the other BRICS, including India.

Like Russia, India views BRICS and its utility in terms of prestige and international standing.⁵² For Indian leaders, the group serves as confirmation of (and perhaps elevation to) much-coveted major power status. Part of BRICS' appeal for India has been its informal, non-binding character, which is in line with India's traditional preference for flexibility and autonomy in foreign policy making and its aversion to formal blocs and alliances.⁵³ As a result, Indian policy makers have opposed Russia's attempts at BRICS political institutionalisation (for example, its projects to create a BRICS defence council or parliamentary assembly),⁵⁴ lest they undermine India's 'strategic autonomy' and unnecessarily signal anti-Western attitudes. India is careful not to antagonise the US by its association with BRICS,⁵⁵ so it has also indicated to Russia its unwillingness to use BRICS as a platform against the Western-led global liberal order, preferring to view it as a means to reform it (e.g. by advocating a reform of the international financial institutions).⁵⁶ Consistent with their overall policy on multipolarity, Indian leaders have increasingly viewed BRICS in economic terms,⁵⁷ as a means to satisfy India's development needs, stimulate its growth and boost its national power. The Indian External Affairs Ministry's latest *Annual Report*, for instance, mentions BRICS mostly in the context of India's multilateral economic relations.⁵⁸ This economic approach to BRICS is further evidenced by India's 2012 proposal to create a BRICS development bank and its positive reaction to Russia's 2015 proposal of the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership, as well as by the centrality of economic issues on the BRICS agenda under Indian leadership in 2016.⁵⁹

SCO

At the summer 2005 SCO summit, the decision was taken to accept India, Pakistan and Iran as observers. Some feared this implied 'importing' conflicts, such as the Indo-Pakistani standoff over Kashmir, but others claimed that new members India and Pakistan might find it easier to

^v It is worth stressing that, as Russia sees it, the BRICS concept promotes a model and template for multipolarity and thus does not imply exclusion of other states as potential poles, including the currently hegemonic US and EU – if/when they are willing and ready to be a proper part of the emerging multipolar world with all its distinctive features.

talk to each other through an intermediary organisation, with the added advantage for Russia that the influence of China within the SCO would eventually be diluted. There was, around this time too, the resurgence of the notion that had circulated in 2000, supported by Yevgeny Primakov, that Russia, India and China should build an axis (RIC – the ‘strategic triangle’) to counterbalance the excessive power of the US.⁶⁰ Russia hosted a meeting of the three foreign ministers in 2005 and the first trilateral summit was held in St. Petersburg in July 2006, with regular summits thereafter.⁶¹ The ‘Shanghai spirit’ is credited in some Russian quarters with enriching the theory and practice of contemporary international politics, ‘bringing to life the universal striving of the world community for the democratisation of international relations’.⁶² As Yulia Nikitina further suggests, the SCO could be seen as a tool for achieving multipolarity because it strengthens ties with other great powers, perhaps even to the extent that it could be used for soft-balancing against NATO through regional alliances.⁶³ While Russia and China conducted joint drills (‘Peace Missions’) within the SCO framework in the mid-2000s, leading some to view the organisation as a putative anti-NATO bloc, the lack of formal alliance relations made this appear overblown.⁶⁴

In the 2000s the SCO began to change shape, with India given observer status alongside Pakistan and Iran. This would seem to contradict the Indian concern ‘that China and Russia will collude through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to keep India out of Central Asia’.⁶⁵ Furthermore, Russia has brought India into the heart of Eurasia with its admission to the SCO as a full member, perhaps in an attempt to parry Chinese regional designs. However, this also reveals the dilemma of multipolarity, whereby a diffusion of power can bring with it ‘the problem of clashing and unbalanced power centres’.⁶⁶

India’s reasons for joining the SCO are not that obvious at first, particularly given that the SCO is seen as an organisation created and driven by Chinese interests. One motive for India might be the continuing uncertainty over the US commitment to it on several counts: the US relationship with Pakistan; whether the US will, in fact, assist India to counter Chinese ambitions, as well as US overstretch in foreign policy terms as it seeks to roll back Russian and Iranian influence in Syria. In such a climate of uncertainty, made worse potentially by Donald Trump’s self-proclaimed desire to be an ‘unpredictable’ president, it might begin to make sense to look to other regions and powers - the SCO in Central Asia for example but perhaps even to the RIC grouping - to provide India with ‘opportunities to pursue alternative non-western order building institutions and opportunities for geostrategic hedging in the scenario of a sub continental crisis’.⁶⁷ Given India’s interests in Afghanistan in both economic and strategic terms, membership of the SCO might also prove helpful as a form of crisis management for both India and Russia, given that New Delhi and Moscow share an interest in preventing the emergence of a Taliban government. Managing these interests via an SCO that includes Pakistan also seems logical. Given that regional relations remain tense at times – such as when Pakistan tried to block Indian trade with Afghanistan, only for Afghanistan to respond by concluding a partially seaborne transit trade agreement with Iran and India that would bypass Pakistan⁶⁸ - a condominium of interests managed within a new and expanded SCO might, in the longer term, calm regional anxieties.

The economic dimension might seem then to be a prime area where India’s membership of the SCO could assist. However, given Russia’s persistent curbing of Chinese attempts to raise the economic profile of the SCO, the organisation will hardly bring benefits to India in this regard. On the other hand, given that India has increased diplomatic activity *vis-à-vis* the Central Asian states as part of its search for energy resources, it is possible that previously stalled ideas such as the Chinese idea of an ‘Energy Club’ in the region might be revived within the expanded format.⁶⁹ The shared regional agenda around terrorism appears to have strengthened in particular since the crisis in Syria and Russian involvement there. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

drew particular attention to the proposed membership of India and Pakistan in the SCO in this regard and to the fact that their involvement would strengthen the fight against terrorism in Eurasia. Additionally, the SCO chief, Nikolai Patrushev, suggested that all disagreements between Iran, Russia, China, India and Pakistan would be cast aside due to the pressing need to coordinate in the face of the growing shared threat from terrorism.⁷⁰

Yet, others have questioned the extent to which the SCO might function in this way, pointing to the proposal by China to establish an anti-terrorism alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan outside the SCO framework, so as not to include Russia in the setup. There may be some truth to the view of an Indian commentator that ‘this element of Russia-China rivalry gives Russia and the Central Asian states a reason to support India in the region because it allows them to counterbalance China to a certain degree’.⁷¹

India does have an interest in increasing economic and trade links both to Afghanistan and to the Central Asian states. Yet the underdeveloped nature of economic connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia militates against this. It has been suggested that negotiations to promote a free trade agreement between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) could promote bilateral trade and that proposals for a North-South Transport Corridor (involving Russia, India and Iran) could be implemented as part of a transport corridor connecting South Asia, Iran, Central Asia and Russia.⁷² The question then arises as to whether China’s proposed ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) project could also assist India in developing such ties. India has approached China’s OBOR with caution, as might be expected, given difficult bilateral relations. Furthermore, China has not invited India to join the overland route, but only the maritime one. However, given that both Russian and even US plans for regional projects are jeopardized by the more ambitious Chinese plans, India might be expected to be more enthusiastic in the future about schemes with other regional players, such as Russia. At the same time, Russia’s increasing dependence on China and its acquiescence in Chinese economic plans for the wider region mean that the cooperation agreement between the EEU and the OBOR on developing links across Eurasia might look more threatening to India, as it could serve to increase Chinese economic dominance in both East and Central Asia.

Russia and India in the Asia-Pacific

Both India and the US see each other as priority partners in the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean region, a perception that seems unlikely to change under the Trump administration, on the basis of the limited evidence thus far. The US Maritime Strategy states that, in South Asia, there is ‘a strategic convergence between India’s ‘Act East’ policy and the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, and we are seeking to reinforce India’s maritime capabilities as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean region and beyond’.⁷³ It is widely seen in that region as being promoted by the US as a counterweight to China, in particular given India’s standing as a parliamentary democracy. India’s apparent reorientation to the US has thus been evident in its strengthening of relations with states such as the US, Japan and Australia, all of which share reservations regarding China’s growing regional influence. In a joint statement with the US in September 2015, the two sides even went so far as to say that they would seek to safeguard ‘maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea.’⁷⁴ Some like to suggest that India has clearly appeared therefore to be ‘engaging in soft balancing’ in the Asia-Pacific and still holds onto the idea of ‘strategic autonomy’.⁷⁵

However, Barry Buzan prefers to see India as under-balancing, suggesting that, in this region, balancing is too difficult, given the multiplicity of actors.⁷⁶ While the US may wish India to act

as balancer to China, India remains reluctant to take on a robust role. The 'Act East' policy firmly anchors India in East Asia, not only South East Asia, and is demonstrated by Indian defence diplomacy, for example agreements with Vietnam and Indonesia. Yet the problem remains that, while these states have courted both Russia and India, China remains the power that can provide the necessary public goods in the long term.

Russia, therefore, views India with ambivalence: while India could be a useful support to Russia in the Asia-Pacific, where it is still a marginal player and must deal with an increasingly assertive China, India's role as a beacon of democracy is unsettling. Disquiet has been expressed at both the official level and among the academic community in Russia that this bid to promote Western universal values in the Asia-Pacific, using India as the 'lynchpin' in Hillary Clinton's words, is a negative development.⁷⁷ An issue that has emerged as a bone of contention - between the US and India on the one hand and China on the other - relates to the US-India nuclear deal, which exposed the limitations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and was fiercely opposed by China. China has also acted to block Indian membership of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), although there was also speculation in some quarters that the US was also hesitant to support India for fear of antagonising Pakistan. Significantly, Russia has not sided with China, despite its apparent closeness to Beijing. Indeed Russia's foreign minister noted that Russia might support it 'bearing in mind that India had "an impeccable record of a country that has never been a source of proliferation of nuclear technologies we might support it"'.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Regionalisation tends to be seen by Russia as 'evidence' of multipolarity. Yet, in Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific, regionalisation in the shape of regionalism, rather than serving as a way of hedging against Chinese encroachments on Russian power, may instead dilute Russian control. Identification with region can be problematic, because the Asian emerging powers of China and India 'seem to be more concerned with developing and legitimising their national power aspirations... than with contributing to global governance'.⁷⁹ Nevertheless regionalism remains an important part of Russian diplomacy and constitutes part of a wider project of challenging Western-centric forms of governance both discursively and empirically.⁸⁰

Russia (and to some extent China) has presented the SCO (which, at the time of writing, India is expected to join in June 2017) as an institution capable of promoting certain regional and local norms distinct from those being promoted by the unipolar world and as further evidence of the emergence of a multipolar world. Yet this remains mostly declarative. Furthermore, as Kate Sullivan suggests, as a parliamentary democracy, India projects itself to some extent as an alternative to China and 'a model for other developing states'.⁸¹ India is unlikely then to wish to participate in an organisation that consciously pits itself against the US-led order, further undermining the assertion of a post-American, multipolar world being developed in the foreseeable future. At present, the regional powers appear more concerned with building their own interests than a concerted attempt to build a pan-regional agenda based on norms. This chapter has shown that Russia and Indian understandings of regional and global norms remain too divergent to show strong evidence of emerging 'poles'. Further, while local crisis management and shared interests on issues such as terrorism might be areas where India and Russia converge, India's terrorism agenda has tended to remain at the domestic level. Russia has a strong track record of supplying weapons to India and traditionally has always supplied India with the next generation of aircraft ahead of China. This is likely linked to Russian concerns regarding China's longer-term ambitions *vis-à-vis* Russia and serves to maintain a strategic balance.⁸²

For both Russia and India, uncertainty regarding the nature and timing of any power transition from the US to China presumes the need to continue to maintain a distance from China, although, in the context of worsening relations with the West in recent times, Russia has deepened its substantive partnership with China. India, by virtue of its difficult relationship with China, may well be moved to improve relations with Russia but overall, despite some underlying tensions, it is the partnership with the US that brings India a greater measure of security.

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