

Improved Russia-Pakistan Relations. Moscow's “New Bipolarity”

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There's a growing consensus among Russia's leading experts that International Relations are increasingly characterized by what they've termed the “new bipolarity” that's emerging out of World War C, and it's within this global context that the continued improvement of Russian-Pakistani relations can ensure that Moscow is able to fulfill its grand strategy of becoming the supreme “balancing” force in Eurasia.

The Valdai Club: Russia's Policymaking Vanguard

The countless paradigm-changing processes that have been unleashed across the world as a result of this year's COVID-19 outbreak can be referred to as [World War C](#) because their collective impact on International Relations is expected to be just as powerful as that of the two World Wars. There's a growing consensus among Russia's leading experts that the emerging international system will no longer be [multipolar](#) like was earlier anticipated, but bipolar, with practically everything defined to one degree or another by the global competition between the US and China. This was most recently expressed during an online discussion that the Valdai Club, one of Russia's most prestigious think tanks, held with India's equally prestigious Observer Research Foundation last week titled “[Russia and India: How Not to Fall Under the Grindstone of Others' Rivalries](#)”. Russia's reputable and publicly financed TASS international media outlet reported on its outcome in an article titled “[Russia, India must avoid involvement in China-US standoff, says expert](#)”, which quoted some of the most significant insight shared by several of the participants.

The “New Bipolarity” Gives Birth To The “Neo-NAM”

Valdai Club research director **Fyodor Lukyanov** is reported to have said the following:

“We should by all means stay away from the flywheel of the US-Chinese confrontation, which is gaining momentum. One of the tasks of Russia's foreign policy in the foreseeable future will be to accurately build a system of counterbalances that would on the one hand prevent us from being involved in this confrontation, and on the other hand, enable us to use the fact that there are some other countries that have absolutely no intention to participate in it. Their interests differ, but also their interests may coincide in different ways. There is a common task of positioning oneself in the new world in a new way. I think that India and Russia can play the role of flagships.”

Vasily Kashin, a senior research fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of the Far East, said that:

“What makes the role of Russia and India so special is that the outcome of the US-Chinese standoff will depend on them. The key role of Russia and India is more than obvious to many in the United States and China. Our position implies certain opportunities, but it is rather risky at the same time. It will be quite logical for us to step up our political consultations and political coordination and to give thought to practical cooperation guidelines that would enable us to put greater emphasis on bilateral cooperation.”

Although not directly stated, these experts are referring to what their peers have previously described as the “new bipolarity” and the urgent need for Russia to lead a “new Non-Aligned Movement” (which I refer to as the “Neo-NAM”) in response.

Andrey Kortunov, the Director General of Russia’s similarly influential Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), wrote at length about the first-mentioned concept in the following three works, among others:

- 8 June 2018: “[China and the US in Asia: Four Scenarios for the Future](#)”
- 4 September 2019: “[Between Polycentrism And Bipolarity](#)”
- 7 May 2020: “[About The Wise Monkey Who Came Down From The Mountain](#)”

Alexey Gromyko, the Director General of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Europe, described how the “new bipolarity” of the New Cold War differs from the traditional bipolarity of the Old Cold War:

- 8 May 2020: “[Illusions Of A New Bipolarity](#)”

As for the “new Non-Aligned Movement”, this was proposed by **Oleg Barabanov** — a programme director at the Valdai Club, professor at MGIMO University, and professor at the Russian Academy of Sciences — in May 2019:

- 14 May 2019: “[China’s Road To Global Leadership: Prospects And Challenges For Russia](#)”

Alexei Kupriyanov and **Alexander Korolev**, a researcher at Moscow’s Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) and a junior research fellow at the Moscow’s Higher School of Economics respectively, combined the two concepts in September 2019 to propose that Russia and India jointly lead what they termed the “Peaceful Development Movement” to balance between both superpowers:

- 11 September 2019: “[The Eurasian Chord And The Oceanic Ring: Russia And India As The Third Force In A New World Order](#)”

Elaborating more on their proposal, I co-authored an academic article that was published by Vestnik, the official journal of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) that’s run by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

- 15 May 2020: “[The Prospects Of Russia And India Jointly Leading A New Non-Aligned Movement](#)”

India’s “Multi-Alignment” Against China

The idea of Russia and India jointly leading the Neo-NAM in order to “balance” between the American and Chinese superpowers fully aligns with Moscow’s grand strategic vision that I described back in May 2018:

- 7 May 2018: “[Russia’s Grand Strategy In Afro-Eurasia \(And What Could Go Wrong\)](#)”

On paper, the Neo-NAM proposal is theoretically sound, but much more difficult to pull off in practice because of India’s unprecedented strategic outreaches to the US in recent years that it unconvincingly describes as “multi-alignment”. This slogan is really just a clever marketing ruse to disguise its de-facto pivot towards the US in pursuit of their shared goal of “containing” China. I’ve written dozens of articles extensively analyzing this development, but here are five of the most relevant, beginning with the one where I first made my bold claim over four years ago and then followed by four of the more recent ones confirming that my initial assessment was indeed correct:

- 4 May 2016: “[Is India Now a US Ally?](#)”
- 7 November, 2019: “[India’s RCEP Refusal: Geopolitical Blunder Or Pro-American Pivot?](#)”
- 26 February 2020: “[India’s Geopolitical Pivot Is Now Complete After Trump’s Successful Visit](#)”
- 23 April 2020: “[India’s Selective Embrace Of Economic Nationalism Has Anti-Chinese Motivations](#)”
- 14 May 2020: “[India Is Intensifying Its American-Backed Hybrid War On China](#)”

Interestingly, though, this trend hasn’t had any noticeably negative effect on Russian-Indian relations. To the contrary, ties between the two are closer than ever before, which initially seems counterintuitive unless one recognizes that they’re most likely being driven by the same unstated motivation of jointly building the Neo-NAM. This emerging network of partnerships would enable them to better “balance” between the American and Chinese superpowers, relying on one another as counterweights to those two world leaders with the intent of collectively pooling their diplomatic and other resources in the direction of helping others more confidently do the same under their aegis:

- 27 August 2019: “[New Delhi’s Man In Moscow Is Right, Russia & India Are Global Partners](#)”
- 29 August 2019: “[Russia Might Use BrahMos Missiles To ‘Balance’ China In The South China Sea](#)”
- 3 September 2019: “[The Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor Is The Key To Russia’s Asian Pivot](#)”
- 12 February 2020: “[The Russian-Indian Oil Deal Is An ‘Unpleasant Surprise’ For Iran, Not The US](#)”

Restoring “Balance” To Russia’s “Balancing” Act

India is clearly leveraging its strategic partnerships with the US and Russia to “balance” China, evidently not caring anymore at this point whether Beijing perceives it to be a hostile development or not. Russia, however, doesn’t intend for its recent outreaches towards India to be perceived as threatening China’s interests since it fears the inadvertent emergence of a “security dilemma” between it and its largest Asian neighbor that could be exploited by

third parties and thus ultimately prove to be mutually detrimental. Nevertheless, as it stands, Russia's "balancing" act is becoming increasingly unbalanced in favor of India, as I wrote about here:

- 5 November 2019: "[Improved Russian-Indian Ties Must Be Balanced With Improved Russian-Chinese Ones](#)"
- 21 December 2019: "[2019: The Year That Russia's South Asian 'Balancing' Act Became Unbalanced](#)"
- 17 April, 2020: "[Rare Wrinkle Or Growing Rift?: Russia & China Exchange Criticisms Over World War C](#)"

Russia arguably cannot afford to continue along the present trajectory of tilting much closer to India at what's being perceived to be China's expense, hence why it must urgently recalibrate its "balancing" act. This can theoretically be accomplished through the successful creation of the Neo-NAM, though it'll require a bit than just that in practice in order to convince China that Russia hasn't become India's "junior partner" in "containing" the People's Republic. Russia must therefore retain its hard-earned trust with China simultaneously with preserving its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis India.

The second-mentioned objective is extremely significant given India's de-facto pivot towards the US, which could potentially see New Delhi "dumping" Moscow in the worst-case scenario if the latter is regarded (possibly as a result of Washington's lobbying efforts) as having outlived its strategic utility to the South Asian state. After all, the very concept of "balancing" is a natural outcome of the Neo-Realist theory of International Relations which emphasizes the predominance of ever-changing interests in an anarchic international system, so Russia would do well to "balance" India with someone else the same as India is "balancing" it with the US in order to retain "strategic parity" — and therefore stability — within the emerging Neo-NAM so as to offset that scenario.

The solution to the dual dilemmas of Russia retaining trust with China simultaneously with preserving its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis India is for Moscow to continue to improve its relations with the [global pivot state](#) of Pakistan. I first proposed this in my November 2019 article about "[India's RCEP Refusal, Russia's Eurasian Vision, And Next Week's BRICS Summit](#)", which built upon the extensive work that I've done over the years on the topic of their bilateral relations. For the convenience of those readers who haven't been following my work all that closely during this time or aren't even familiar with it to begin with, here are a few useful links:

- 14 September 2017: "[Russia And Pakistan](#)"
- 10 August 2018: "[The Roadmap For 'Rusi-Pakistani Yaar Yaar'](#)"
- 30 August 2019: "[Russia, Pakistan, And The 'Bait Theory'](#)"
- 19 December 2019: "[The Indo-'Israeli' Trans-Arabian Corridor Will Push Russia Closer To Pakistan](#)"
- 18 January 2020: "[Afro-Eurasia Would Be A Timely Alternative To The Indo-Pacific](#)"
- 28 January 2020: "[This Five-Phase Strategy Can Strengthen Russian-Pakistani Trade Ties](#)"

In short, Russia can use its rapidly expanding relations with Pakistan to perfect its "balancing" act between China and India, just like Pakistan can use them for the purpose of

perfecting its own “balancing” act between China and the US. Their cooperation can take the physical form of the N-CPEC+ trade corridor for connecting Russia to the Afro-Asian (“Indian”) Ocean via Pakistan after transiting through Central Asia and Afghanistan, which also opens up those two aforementioned markets and Russia’s to Pakistan. Russia and Pakistan are each other’s keys to perfecting their respective “balancing” acts, which therefore grants them pivotal global significance.

Concluding Thoughts

The New Cold War between the American and Chinese superpowers, which was already unfolding prior to the onset of World War C but was drastically accelerated by it, has led to the emergence of what Russian experts are describing as the “new bipolarity”. This state of international affairs provides the perfect environment in which the Eurasian Great Power can pursue its grand strategic objective of becoming the supreme “balancing” force in the supercontinent, though provided that its relevant policies are properly practiced. For that to happen, the joint creation of a Neo-NAM with India isn’t enough since that development might in and of itself be perceived very negatively by China and could subsequently provoke an unintended “security dilemma”. In addition, Russia also risks becoming India’s “junior partner”, which would put it in a very disadvantageous position if that pro-American South Asian state decides to “dump” it in the future (possibly as a result of Washington’s lobbying) and at sometime after Moscow might have inadvertently burned some of its bridges with Beijing. Russia’s dilemma is therefore twofold: retain its hard-earned trust with China simultaneously with preserving its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis India.

The solution to this seemingly unsolvable problem is simple enough, and it’s for Russia to continue improving its relations with Pakistan. The global pivot state is also attempting to “balance” between the American and Chinese superpowers, just like Russia is, and their rapidly expanding relations with one another send important signals to India and China. New Delhi sees that Moscow has a regional alternative in the event that India moves too close to the US at Russia’s perceived expense, just like Beijing sees that Russia is strengthening ties with the host country of the Belt & Road Initiative’s (BRI) flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that China proudly describes as its “[iron brother](#)”. The expected outcome is that India would be disinclined to upset the “strategic parity” that it has with Russia in the emerging Neo-NAM out of fear that its partner might pivot towards Pakistan in response, while China would be reassured of Russia’s neutral “balancing” intentions by virtue of the fact that it’s prioritizing strategic relations with Beijing’s South Asian ally. Seeing as how Russian-Pakistani relations are the fulcrum upon which these complex “balancing” acts are being practiced, this axis can therefore be regarded as among the most strategically significant anywhere in the world in the context of the “new bipolarity”.

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