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Russia's Role in India-China Issues: Subtle and Nuanced

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In the backdrop of the worst clashes between the two Asian countries, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar interacted with his counterparts Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as part of the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral virtual meet. Meanwhile at the same time, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was in Moscow to attend the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Rajnath Singh also used the visit to 'press for expedited delivery of the S-400 Triumf BMD system that had been delayed by Russia due to COVID-19 disruptions.'¹ In addition to this, India also seeks speedy supply of spare parts for its fleet of Sukhoi and MiGs.

As India deals with the fallout of the border clashes with China, Russia's role has been on the minds of many in India. Moscow is not only the current chair of the Russia-India-China forum (RIC) but shares crucial ties with both countries. In this light, the RIC meeting was seen as critical

for the Kremlin as India-China border clashes threatened its cancellation.

Some commentators have claimed India's inclination towards Russia to be 'unsentimental realism' on India's part given the gradual deepening of Sino-Russian relations.² They argue that Russia will be increasingly forced to take China's side in a conflict involving India as the Kremlin has more at stake in its relationship with Beijing. In addition to this, there is also a growing recognition that Russia is not a suitable partner for India to balance against China, as it is a pale shadow of the erstwhile USSR in both economic and military terms.

Both questions – of Russia's potential acquiescence to China & Russia's supposed ineffectiveness as a potential partner – deserve attention and some unpacking. It is also important to note here that, from Russia's point of view, the context of both India and China's participation in the RIC meet goes beyond the recent border clashes.³ Russia is looking to refashion its foreign policy given the changing

strategic environment and to better secure its vital interests.

Firstly, Moscow has been cognizant of the reality of Beijing's assertive rise in world politics. While their mutual dependence rests on overlapping geopolitical interests, there are serious issues that continue to threaten the foundations of this burgeoning partnership. In spite of the upswing in relations, Russia's primary fear is to 'lose strategic autonomy of action' vis-à-vis its external relations.⁴ Furthermore, the strategic environment has been less kind to Russia since its annexation of Crimea with the US and Europe slow to accept the former's re-inclusion into its club. Given that the exercise of autonomy is often hard to execute when the geopolitical environment constrains oneself, Russia understands its acute limitations. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that Moscow turns to Beijing as a potential saviour.

However, it would be incorrect to term their relationship as being completely driven by China. For instance, one of Russia's core interests is its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project that is facing challenge from China's BRI. In a recent high-level event on BRI International Cooperation, Russia was predictably not a participant at the ministerial level. There are whispers of dialling down the level of Russian participation in the project as China remains 'unexcited about the Greater Eurasian Partnership' mooted by the former.⁵ Weak EU representation has slowed down investment

prospects for China, which makes Russia's support to BRI even more important. Russia faces imminent threats to its core interests from China in the context of Central Asia, Arctic, Far East etc. These issues portend anything but smooth relations between the two countries. Therefore, it largely remains a relationship of convenience that can run into a downward spiral based on either side's exercise of unilateral measures. Two recent examples come to mind: In March, Russia was one of the first countries to close its borders with China owing to the pandemic outbreak; and in a first public spy scandal involving an ex-navy Russian captain led him to be charged with treason for 'allegedly passing classified information to China on Russian submarine technology.'⁶

On the issue of Russia's capacity to play a larger role, there are multiple recent examples to suggest that Moscow is not leaving other countries to write its destiny. Its recent forays in Asia are a case in point. Take for instance, Russia's growing leverage in Afghanistan after the US deal with Taliban and mediator role in Libya. In many ways, the decision not to postpone the RIC meet in the context of India-China tensions is also testament to Russia's continued relevance in current times. Moscow is also trying to 'steer itself away from the impending Sino-American rivalry'⁷ and finds a receptive partner in India that is also looking to avoid entanglements between the two most powerful countries in the world.

Therefore, Russia's role is not ineffective in the context of India-China tensions as it seeks to play a more neutral role to maintain its interests with both sides. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's statement that both sides can manage their own problems and 'don't require outside help' was not only a jibe at US President Donald Trump's offers to mediate but also that Russia is willing to engage in a balancing act. Russia accounts for 58% of India's arms imports in 2014-2018. This is not a small number, although it does mark a relative decline compared to earlier. However, this is likely to expand in the upcoming five-year period with 'S-400 air defence systems, four stealth frigates, AK-203 assault rifles, a second nuclear attack submarine on lease, and deals for Kamov-226T utility helicopters, Mi-17 helicopters and short-range air defence systems' in the pipeline.⁸ While many fear that Russia is too close to China for India's liking, the long standing India-Russia relationship cannot be written off so easily.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Pranab Dhal Samanta, "Rajnath Singh's Russia visit: India to urge Russia to rush delivery of S-400 system", The Economic Times, 22 June, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/rajnath-singhs-russia-visit-india-to-urge-russia-to-rush-delivery-of-s-400-system/articleshow/76501432.cms>

² Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Jaishankar's foreign policy audit sits uneasy with his reading of current global situation", The Print, 16 November, 2019, [https://theprint.in/opinion/jaishankars-foreign-policy-](https://theprint.in/opinion/jaishankars-foreign-policy-audit-sits-uneasy-with-his-reading-of-current-global-situation/)

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³ Shubhajit Roy, "Explained: In India-China, the Russia role", 23 June, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-china-border-dispute-galwan-faceoff-resolution-russia-6471548/>

⁴ Dmitri Trenin, "How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World", Carnegie Moscow Center, 01 May, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81702>

⁵ Zamir Ahmed Awan, "Conference on BRI international cooperation calls for unity in face of pandemic", People's Daily Online, 22 June, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0622/c90000-9702988.html>

⁶ Ann M Simmons, "Russia Charges Scientist With Passing Information to China", The Wall Street Journal, 16 June, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-charges-scientist-with-passing-information-to-china-11592246286>

⁷ Yaroslav Trofimov & Thomas Grove, "Weary Russia Tries to Avoid Entanglement in U.S.-China Spat", The Wall Street Journal, 22 June, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/weary-russia-tries-to-avoid-entanglement-in-u-s-china-spat-11592654401>

⁸ The Hindu, "India is world's second-largest arms importer", 11 March, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-is-worlds-second-largest-arms-importer/article26502417.ece#:~:text=Russia%20accounted%20for%2058%25%20of,to%20India%20in%202014%2D18.>