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Russian Balancing Strategy: Setbacks in 2020?

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

The tense state of Sino-Indian relations since their June 2020 border clashes threatens the future of Russia's major foreign policy platforms to reduce US and Western influence in the Asia-Pacific and in the world. It represents a foreign policy setback for Russia in 2020.

COMMENTARY

RUSSIA HAS enormous stakes in stable Sino-Indian relations and cannot be indifferent to the increased tensions between the two Asian powers. Moscow plays a key role in the Russia-India-China (RIC) triangle, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the BRICS, which are important Russian foreign policy platforms.

The RIC foreign ministers have been meeting trilaterally since 2003; the RIC's importance to Russian foreign policy is clear: China and India are seen as crucial to achieving Russia's objectives of building a multipolar world, with less US/Western influence in the Asia-Pacific in particular and the world in general.

China, India in Russia's Balancing Strategy

Established in 2001, with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as founder members, the SCO's broad objectives are to stabilise relations among the Central Asian states with their two powerful neighbours and to promote the development of its members. India and Pakistan joined in 2017. The SCO has proven useful for Central Asia to work principally with China and Russia on a multilateral basis, to balance both powers which are crucial to their well-being and development.

For Russia, India balances the growing weight of China in the SCO and in Central Asia itself, a key region to Moscow.

The sustainability and even political future of the SCO therefore depend much on the dynamics of the relationship between China and India, given their politico-economic and military weight and membership in the SCO. Should their bilateral tensions worsen, they would have some negative impact on the SCO's functioning and effectiveness as a forum and platform for Russia's own interests.

The BRICS forum is key to Russia's foreign policy objectives of lessening US/Western global influence in geopolitical and geo-economic terms as well as to Russia's economic objectives of promoting more economic interaction among the BRICS member states. To Russia, India and China are important partners in Eurasia and hence, are seen as the key players in BRICS. Brazil and South Africa are too geographically and politically distant to play any meaningful role in Eurasia.

Tension between the two Asian powers might weaken BRICS member states' commitments to their economic and socio-political objectives and declarations; the worst-case scenario would be a looser BRICS.

Russia holds the Chairmanship in 2020 of the SCO and BRICS and hence must be concerned about the ramifications of Sino-Indian tensions on the work of the SCO and BRICS in the immediate and near-term. Russia's own bilateral links with China and India are also crucial to its global position and its own economic development.

Russo-Indian and Russo-Chinese Relations

India is a major purchaser of Russian weapons and growing investor in the Russian energy sector. Enjoying close links with India also ensures that Russia can counterbalance the growing strategic and politico-economic weight of China in the Asia-Pacific as well as in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia does not want to see India's relations with the United States become stronger than they already are.

For instance, Russia would not want India to become an active member of the Quad; Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reportedly criticised this US-led Indo-Pacific initiative, calling it a "divisive approach" to disrupt existing regional structures and contain China.

An indication of President Vladimir Putin's close relationship with Indian PM Narendra Modi was seen in the former's warm greetings to Modi on his 70th birthday on 17 September 2020. No doubt, this gesture was not only well-meant personally but also acted as an indication of Russia's close links with India.

Russia's strong relationship with China is a function of their common threat perception of the US, their current economic complementarity (Russian energy for Chinese goods) and strategic convergence in the Asia-Pacific to ensure that the region is not dominated by the US and its allies like Japan.

China is also a major importer of Russian energy, a major investor in its energy sector,

and Russia's largest trading partner. Both have been conducting military exercises bilaterally or with other countries in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). This is a military alliance comprising six post-Soviet republics, namely Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Of late, observers have prematurely speculated about a de facto alliance between Russia and China.

However, the border clashes with India appear to have led to Russian concern about China. According to a South China Morning Post article in August 2020, the Chinese websites NetEase and Sohu reported in July that deliveries of the Russian S-400 missile system had been "delayed" due to the coronavirus, but Moscow said later the deliveries had been "suspended". One can only speculate as to Russia's motives in this regard.

Russia as Unofficial Honest Broker

For the above reasons, tense Sino-Indian relations are not in Russia's interest.

The fact that India and China have sought to iron out their differences on the sidelines of the mid-September SCO Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow illustrates Russia's crucial role in trying to reduce tensions, as an unofficial honest broker.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Indian counterpart, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, agreed to improve mutual trust to ensure peace along their disputed border, and to avoid any action that could escalate the situation; however, no mention was made of any troop withdrawal date.

Their Russian counterpart Lavrov was quoted as saying that Russia was "very happy" to have provided "a platform" for the two Asian powers to discuss the border tensions and stabilise the situation.

Nevertheless, India's defence minister reportedly said on 15 September that the border issue remains "unresolved". Noteworthy is that the Sino-Indian relationship is now undergoing difficulties on the [economic front](#) as well.

The fact that Sino-Indian tensions still remain and have spilled over into the economic realm manifests the obvious limits of Russian influence on either of its crucial partners. Russia can therefore only wait-and-see how far the situation will unfold. Moscow's difficult balancing posture in the last several years between the two Asian powers might turn out to be not as practical as it could have been assumed all this time.

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