

THE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF EURASIA IN THE XXI CENTURY: PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIAN-INDIAN RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary expert assessments, we can increasingly hear the idea that unipolar system that has been in place since the 1990s has begun to fail systematically and to increase the threat of global geopolitical chaos. The world is on the threshold of multipolarity and requires different methodological assessments and theoretical approaches. This paper analyses the prospects of the new global economic and political centres that have already declared their economic potential, but have not yet fully articulated their priority geopolitical interests. Especially Eurasia is becoming an area of heightened interest to the world's leading powers, an area of rapid economic and demographic growth, as well as a venue for the escalation of serious geopolitical conflicts. In these conditions, the problems of regional security and timely prevention of local and global challenges and threats with the potential for serious economic and political conflicts are growing.

Keywords: geopolitics, Eurasia, security, international relations, political elites, International North-South Transport Corridor, sovereignty, multipolar world, challenges and threats, conflicts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia may be determined by the three great and ancient civilizing powers of China, India, and Iran, so it is important for Russia (as a great Eurasian power), adequately considering its possibilities, to correctly determine the emerging prospects of global development and its own growth. Even Z. Brzezinski wondered whether the US-led monopoly world could respect the principles of democracy, freedom, pluralism, and open market competition. In rhetoric it was "yes". In practice, it turned out to be "no".

While narrowing the topic to the level of Russian-Indian relations, it should be emphasized that the Eurasian world order is made up of many such bilateral relations and agreements. We can see that the political elites of the two countries are interested in constructive full-scale political and economic cooperation. And the North-South ITC project is one of the drivers of this cooperation. Furthermore, this route runs through the

central Heartland zone and bears a crucial geopolitical load.

In view of these circumstances, the object of this study is the geopolitical problems of Eurasia, and the subject is cooperation between Russia and India at the present stage of the development of their international relations. A preliminary hypothesis is that the national political and economic elites of Russia and India are fundamentally interested in developing their sovereignty and eliminating the dictates of one single political centre of the world (the US). The emerging issue is to identify the prospects of Russian-Indian relations in the light of the changing geopolitical landscape of contemporary Eurasia. The task at hand requires a range of research methods, from the general scientific (dialectics, hermeneutics, comparativism) to the historical, statistical, system analysis, situational and activity methods, etc.

2. THE CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF EURASIA

The geopolitical landscape described by Z. Brzezinski at the end of the 20th century painted a disintegrated Eurasian infinity, dominated by the main global "peacemaker" such as the USA [1]. At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, we see a somewhat different landscape of Eurasia, and we realize that not all of the "prophecies" of the American geopolitics have come true in practice. We see an awakened East and a slowly fading West [5]. The importance of Eurasia "began to be talked about again with the beginning of the economic rise of China and India and the shift of the centre of the world geopolitics and geo-economics there. The region is home to six of the nine nuclear powers, it has huge reserves of energy and 70% of the world's population. It is also the scene of many conflicts and, consequently, rivalries between major powers. As a rising power in Eurasia, India has no choice but to participate in multilateral and bilateral formats of relations that have evolved in the region. This is especially important given the lack of any established security architecture here" [11, p. 6]. India is projected to become the world's second largest economy by GDP by 2030, pushing the US into third place. Russia's geopolitical partnership with China and India is strategically beneficial, both in terms of trade and military-political relations.

New global centres of power are emerging in today's world. "India is well aware that the current international relations are characterized by the change of technological modes, the transformation of the current system takes place, so the previous model of the world order led by the hegemon represented by the United States is gradually disappearing. New global centres of power are emerging, spreading their geopolitical and geo-economic influence in the area of American interests" [2].

The positions of Russia and India on a range of international issues are similar or close. "India strongly opposes the formation of a unipolar world, attempts at unilateral diktat and coercion, irrespective of which country may occupy the 'world Olympus'. It is interested in an inclusive world order where the UN would have a central role and large and small states would interact on an equal basis" [3, p. 8].

According to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, "Russia and India are united in their willingness to face the challenges and threats of the 21st century together and to promote a positive and unifying agenda in world affairs" [2]. According to the diplomat, independent and responsible policies on the international stage remain an important factor in ensuring global and regional stability. The two countries "share a common understanding of the need to build a polycentric and democratic world order based on strict observance of the norms and principles of international law. Moreover,

Russia and India are already cooperating productively within the UN, the G20, the BRICS format and the SCO [2]. The diplomat noted that "historically, we have had strong relations with India, and today this country is an important strategic partner. For example, India accounts for the main supplies of Russian arms. Furthermore, India, as one of the major centres of power in the new polycentric world and in the multipolar system of international relations, is also doing its utmost to combat global challenges such as terrorism, extremism, separatism and cyber threats" [2].

"South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions of the world. Integration is hampered by a number of factors, including rivalry between India and Pakistan; generous promises from China tempting a number of smaller countries to play 'non-alignment'; India's sluggishness in implementing promised projects and inability to match China in financial capacity, as well as lack of trust between members" [11, pp. 6-7].

Official New Delhi adheres to the concept of multilateralism in international structures. "India has spearheaded the creation of multilateral institutions like the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). These structures reflect India's desire and intention to become a global player in the Indo-Pacific region, which it regards as its sphere of influence, and to defend its naval interests in the face of China's increasing naval power [11]. Political analysts argue that these moves "betray India's desire to surround itself with coalitions of its own and act as a kind of 'coordinator of military power-building efforts' against China". It is also pointed out that both these initiatives have "systematically excluded powers that India believes do not belong in the region, including China, the US, the UK and France". India is interested in the stability of Central Asia, so it takes an interest in the SCO [18, p. 174].

Currently, Moscow and Delhi interact quite productively within the UN, G20, BRICS and SCO frameworks. In recent years, the momentum of such cooperation has only increased. In 2020, the common aspiration of countries such as China, India and Russia to further pursue their national interests will be perceived by the US as a challenge to their US-centred worldview. And unless Washington recognizes the need to reckon with the new centres of power, the transition from a monocentric to a multicentric world may be delayed indefinitely. "That is why it is very important that India should support Russia and China in every possible way to challenge the US-centred world order, under which the US sets its own rules and constraints, while the rest of the world centres should strictly follow its foreign policy fairway" [2]. Sooner or later, this common desire of Russia, India and China to defend their own interests within the framework of the new world order will force the US to reckon with the new world centres of power [8].

At the official level, Moscow and New Delhi show complete mutual understanding. Russia and India take into account the multidirectional and pragmatic nature of their foreign policy courses. In its 'pivot to the East', Moscow sees new political and economic centres emerging in Eurasia. Narendra Modi, who became India's prime minister in May 2014, has long-established contacts with representatives of Russian regions (for example, Modi signed his first international agreement as Gujarat chief minister with the governor of Astrakhan Region). Following N. Modi's visit to Moscow in December 2015, a joint statement was adopted, which stressed that the "unique in world practice nature of Russian-Indian relations" is based on "time-tested deep mutual trust and friendship between the two peoples", which expresses "unwavering support for strengthening and expanding bilateral relations"[3, p. 6].

Official Delhi has repeatedly stressed "that India intends to actively develop cooperation with Asian neighbours (both small countries - Bhutan and Nepal, and major regional powers - Iran, Japan and Australia), as well as with the key global players (the United States, Russia, China) and the leading multilateral organizations (G20, BRICS, SCO)"[3, p. 6]. The development of economic potential and political authority is seen by the Indian leadership as an important factor in turning the country into one of the significant world poles, allowing it to take its rightful place in the community of nations and international institutions [21, p. 39].

All existing contemporary global challenges have become a shared responsibility and to deal with them there is a need to create mechanisms that exclude the interference of third forces (primarily the collective West) which undermine existing processes. India is currently one of the main engines of economic growth. Obviously, India's military and political potential will increase as its economic performance improves. Therefore, Russia and India have an interest in each other to address the threats of the 21st century.

Obviously, in the global competition between the leading global actors "different parties will try to maintain the West's shaken dominance by provoking increased tensions and creating flash points along the perimeter of the leading new political powers and centres, such as Russia, China and India [2].

3. THE GREAT EURASIAN TRIANGLE: RUSSIA - INDIA - CHINA (RIC)

¹ "Speaking at a reception hosted by President K.R. Narayanan, Primakov once again expressed the hope that India, China, and Russia would be able to establish a "strategic triangle" that would be in the interests of peace and security. "India," Primakov said, "is a great power, and a lot depends on the policy pursued by India, Russia and China"" [24].

The political history of the twentieth century has shown the very effective role of international coalitions and alliance blocs. The United States has been particularly successful in this, using such alliances to advance its national interests. To ensure peace and order in Eurasia, the leading Eurasian powers should learn to use this experience, but to defend their national interests.

This geopolitical triangle was noticed by the politicians in the early 20th century. Lenin said that "the fate of the revolutionary process depends on Russia, China and India"[6, p. 403-404]. E.M. Primakov (1929-2015), Prime Minister of Russia (11.09.1998 - 12.05.1999), came up with the idea of the Eurasian triangle (ETC) at the end of the twentieth century. In December 1998, in Delhi, he expressed the idea of a "strategic triangle" of Russia - India - China, noting that in the "three-country partnership format it could bring greater stability to the world and the region" (INFO-TASS. AIST-87. 21.12.1998)¹. Analysts note that "the undoubted merit of Prime Minister Primakov was that the initiative, which was systemic in its essence, was announced at a high government level, on a specific day and at a specific time. And it is particularly important that it was formulated in a flexible and diplomatic way: there, in Delhi, E.M. Primakov specified that it was not about an "alliance", but precisely about a "partnership format" [16, p. 32].

Indian analysts acknowledge that "the RIC concept was first formulated by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. The RIC is a partnership of three major Asian countries. Importantly, these three contiguous countries account for 19 per cent of the world's land mass and about 37 per cent of the world's population. All three are nuclear powers, and two - Russia and China - are permanent members of the UN Security Council, while India is also seeking this status. At first glance, the RIC can hardly become a serious association, given the not exactly serene relations that have existed in the past between India and China and between the USSR and China. However, "the troika" is linked by the growing partnership between Beijing and Moscow and the longstanding friendship between Russia and India. Therefore, in a certain sense, Russia plays the role of a bridge between India and China, with which it has strong ties" [11, p. 8].

The agenda-setting process of the RIC involves not only political but also academic societies². As early as 2001, the RIC experts developed a tripartite consensus on the most basic model of their cooperation. Such a model, developing Primakov's thesis, was to be a partnership

²In 2001, a trilateral academic dialogue was initiated when the first academic conference of Russia, India and China was held at the Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Since then, trilateral meetings of RIC scholars have become annual, held alternately in each of the three countries [16, p. 31].

dialogue structure (RIC format), "not implying restrictions on the independence and autonomy of participating countries", "not implying formation, blocs, etc." and based on the three "not" principles - not block/union, not confrontation, not targeting third countries [12, p. 16].

The great Eurasian triangle (Russia-India-China) has undoubted benefits for the participating countries in that it creates new conditions for solving serious regional and global problems (joint elimination of natural and man-made disasters, combating drug trafficking and terrorism, ensuring cyber security, and strengthening economic integration) [25]. However, the main problem on the way to this rapprochement is the existing differences between China and India [28], and it will not be easy for Russia to act as a peacemaker in their relations. Moreover, there are countries (such as the US) that appear to be interested in fomenting the India-China conflict. Russia must counter this imperial policy of 'divide and rule' (*divide et impera*) with a policy of peaceful coexistence and an equitable dialogue of cultures.

Specialists note that "an undoubted and long-term challenge is associated with the not very publicized, but really existing policy of "containment" of the RIC by the USA. For example, over the last decade and a half, this is manifested in Washington's explicit intentions to "strap India" to its policy and detach it from traditional and natural partners-neighbours" [16, p. 38].

In the case of growing conflicts in the creation of the "Great Eurasian Triangle", it is possible to go to plan "B" and create a "Small Eurasian Triangle": "Russia - Iran - India". In both cases, these projects will be pacifist and integrationist in nature. The third ideal option is a "Eurasian quadrilateral": "Russia - Iran - China - India". In such a format, the geopolitical geometry of Eurasia becomes absolutely stable.

"The merit of such a trilateral association is that it can become an important forum for discussing the foundations of the security architecture in Eurasia, since all three countries are already known to be, albeit to a different extent, important players on the Eurasian arena" [11, p. 8].

It has become clear to the countries of Eurasia that they can easily do without mediators and solve their problems by themselves, responding to the most complex international challenges and threats. The RIC creates a civilization trap for the US - unfair competition and a tendency to solve problems exclusively by force puts it outside the framework of this civilized club. If its current geopolitical vector persists, the US itself will gradually become a pariah country.

4. NORTH-SOUTH ITC IS A ZONE OF INCREASED COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION

Even Z. Brzezinski argued for a so-called "pluralistic" (i.e. fragmented) Eurasia, subordinated to US political will and national interests. And for a long time, Washington managed to restrain the integration potential of the leading countries of this region. However, in 2010, the leading Eurasian powers (China, India, Russia, Iran) increasingly declared their intention of trade, economic and political rapprochement.

The collective West, represented by the United States and its closest "allies", is used to talking a great deal about the problem of diversification (*diversificatio*) of energy supplies to Western Europe and, in particular, about the need to eliminate Western dependence on Russian energy resources. At the same time, they sidestep the existing monopoly on control of the international Panama-Egypt transport route ("Panama Canal - Suez Canal") through which the main flow of goods takes place. This control is exercised by a coalition of Anglo-Saxon forces that has military bases along the route. The profits that the U.S. and its partners derive from the exploitation of this equatorial logistics route are measured not only in financial, but also in geopolitical dividends. Other countries (such as China and Russia) are clients rather than "patrons" in this "field". Therefore, the question of diversifying the equatorial transport corridor becomes relevant for Beijing and Moscow.

At the beginning of 2010, Russia made a political decision to reform the international transport system and, in particular, to introduce the Arctic and Caspian projects namely the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Both of these projects, as well as China's "One Belt, One Road" project, should diversify the logistical tradition of the Anglo-Saxons of the twentieth century. While India, due to its geographical position, may well be satisfied with an equatorial route (Panama-Egypt), China and Russia are interested in expanding logistical opportunities and are in favour of free trade and freedom of logistics.

The NSR is scheduled to increase freight traffic to 80 million tons per year between 2019 and 2024, and 905.6 billion rubles will need to be invested (of which 305 billion will come from the state and the remaining 600.6 billion from non-budgetary funding). According to specialists' calculations, the route will take 10-12 days in the autumn months and up to 40 days in the winter months [13].

The geopolitical peculiarity of the North-South ITC is that it actually runs through the central *Heartland zone* and becomes the most important geoeconomic and intercultural crossroads of the entire region. As far back as at the beginning of the XX century, English geopolitician H. Mackinder noted that the Eurasian expanse is "*the heart-land of the Euro-Asia*", the heart of the world and "axis of the world history". "Is not the pivot region of the world politics that vast area of Euro-Asia which is inaccessible to ships, but in antiquity lay open to nomads?" [7, p. 168].

Obviously, the North-South ITC project has a pan-Eurasian integration character that could strengthen the sovereignty of its member countries. India understands the benefits of diversifying its transport capabilities and invested heavily in the reconstruction of the Iranian port of Chabahar as early as 2016, which is an integral part of the North-South ITC project [10]. Even earlier (in the late 1990s) Russia built the seaport of Olya near Astrakhan, which was to become the northern point of the Caspian section of this route.

China is also interested in the Caspian Sea. It is also interested in the Caspian East-West international transport route, which takes less time and strengthens energy cooperation between Beijing and the Caspian littoral states. In autumn 2013, during his visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, Xi Jinping put forward the idea of "One Belt, One Road"³, which would combine the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road projects (the shortest land route from the *Asia-Pacific Region* (APR) through Eurasia to Europe could cut 50% of the distance and is more reliable than the sea route) [14]. Trade between China and Europe already reaches \$700 billion in 2014 and may exceed \$1 trillion by 2020 [17].

"One Belt, One Road" will be a trade bridge between Europe and China, connecting the Greek port of Piraeus (Athens) and Khorgos (the International Centre for Border Cooperation (ICBC) for duty-free trade between China and Kazakhstan), which runs through Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It is known that China COSCO Shipping operates a container terminal in the port of Athens (this route is much cheaper and faster for China than the northern Belarus-Russia-Mongolia routes) [22]. The second route is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran railway project: The Five Nations Rail Corridor (FNRC), a 2,100-km-long project that connects China with the Iranian ports of Chahbehband and Bandar Abbas.

However, the instability of the Central Asian region and the presence of US troops in Afghanistan make this route highly vulnerable in terms of global geopolitics. Back in the early 2000s, the American analysts declared, "The new American bases established during the Afghan campaign in Central Asia will remain necessary to the United States for a long time and for such long-term objectives as the war against terrorism and, possibly, the control over the rising China" [19, p. 98]. "The American factor" may play into Russia's hands in this situation and force this route north, i.e. through its territory, which is more attractive from a security point of view.

Thus, the One Belt, One Road and the North-South ITC could become competitive projects for China and India and give Russia additional resources to bring their positions closer and level out the existing differences between Beijing and Delhi.

The foreign policy of official Delhi indicates that India is oriented towards the formation of a 'unity in diversity' world order model characterized by consensus and the interaction of 'horizontally' organized states that operate on the principle of coordination rather than subordination. For this reason, India has always shown "great interest in enhancing cooperation within established international structures such as BRICS and the SCO (the latter which it joined, along with Pakistan, in 2015). The basic approaches of these organizations are unconditional respect for international law, sovereignty and national development choices. They do not oppose themselves to other international formats and offer a peaceful unifying agenda of cooperation" [3, pp. 8-9].

Russian-Indian economic cooperation covers a wide range of areas, from nuclear energy, armaments and pharmaceuticals to energy and food supplies. Food security is particularly acute in the 21st century. India is projected to experience dramatic growth in its middle class (600 million people) by 2030 [27], which would lead to consumption levels "comparable to those in Europe, and environmental concerns should force India to seek new ways of feeding itself. Russia could become a natural partner in solving this problem and ensuring India's food security" [3, p. 23].

Analysts note that "Russia and India share a common vision of a 'new' more just, harmonious and polycentric world order. The countries have common or close positions on key issues of modern international relations, including the issue of strengthening the role of developing countries in the formulation and adoption of decisions on global political and economic problems" [3, p. 8]. India, as well as Russia, is also interested in a fair (i.e. multipolar) world, where no one neglects its national interests and considers it a "second-rate" country.

In this context, it is worth pointing out a problem that exists in the Persian Gulf area, which could influence the deterioration of the North-South ITC project process. It is about the presence of US bases in the region. It is known that since the 1990s, immediately after the end of the Cold War, the US Navy was reoriented to protecting maritime communications on those oceanic routes linking the US economy with the global one. The new ideologues of the US declared that Admiral A. Machen's geopolitical concept had become popular and relevant again [26]. In 1995, Assistant Secretary of Defense J. Nye

³The essence of this Chinese initiative is to seek, shape and promote a new model of international cooperation and development by strengthening existing regional bilateral and multilateral mechanisms and interaction structures with China's participation. According to

Chinese officials, "One Belt, One Road" covers most of Eurasia, connecting developing countries, including emerging economies, and developed countries. The megaproject area is rich in resources, is home to 63% of the world's population, and has an estimated economic size of \$21 trillion [17].

declared that the United States would be ready "to defend America's vital interests in the region unilaterally, by its own forces if necessary"[20]. In 1999, the head of the US Central Command (in charge of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf), General E. Zinni, asserted that "the American vital interest in the Persian Gulf is of a long-term nature: the United States must have free access to the region, which contains 65 percent of the global oil reserves.

Therefore, participants in the North-South ITC project should not forget that the leading player in this region is the so-called 'world gendarme', the United States, which has longstanding close business ties with the leading oil powers of the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf itself is the southern section of Eurasia's Caspian pivot region. And countries such as Russia, Iran and India have an interest in maintaining political peace and economic stability there. For the US (as recent political history shows), it is important to control this region using the Roman imperial principle of "*divide et impera*". "Washington is keeping a close eye on the strategic triangle of the Persian Gulf-Caspian Basin-South China Sea. 74% of the world's oil is produced in this triangle, and there is no way for the world hegemon to "get around" it. Political ambition, religious strife, and the desire for vast oil wealth have ruled the region since 1908, when the first large oil fields were discovered in Iran. Today, the American officials are in favour of the American military presence in the region and are ready to use force in case of any encroaching on the oil wealth of the region" [15, p. 232].

The USA is interested in prolonging the declared "rogue countries" status of Iran and Russia for as long as possible, which allows them to justify the inexpediency of development of the North-South ITC, the implementation of which will be the strongest blow to their monopoly on world trade. The task of the USA is to "detach" India from this integration process in order to confront it simultaneously with China, Russia and Iran. Such a confrontation will be in the interests of the US but will be a blow to the world order in Eurasia. This configuration of international relations would be a threat to India's sovereignty, as it would be a means of the US policy of strengthening the monopoly world order.

5. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are witnessing the waning passionarity of the West and the gaining power of the East. The leaders and new world centers are not the US satellite countries (Japan and South Korea), but China, India, Iran and Russia, which they do not control. The geopolitical configuration of Eurasia is changing rapidly. The times when separate territories of Eurasia were colonies of the West are gone. Now Eurasia itself is capable of "colonizing" the West by disposing of its former geopolitical ambitions [4].

For Russian analysts, it is clear that the development of the North-South ITC project will further strengthen the

joint positive agenda of international relations between Russia and India, as well as serve to strengthen partnerships with Iran. The implementation of the project should further strengthen our country's position in the region and create new opportunities for large-scale cooperation with the leading countries of the region.

In the context of worsening relations with the West, Russia needs to develop an optimal model for Eurasian cooperation with the new world's leading centres. Moscow has already begun to use coordination with India and China to agree on common solutions to the most important problems on the international agenda. The delicacy of this approach is not to counter the idea of creating a global counterweight to Western countries, since Beijing and New Delhi are interested in an economic partnership with the West.

Much, perhaps not all, depends on the ability of ruling elites to build sound international political relations aimed at integration rather than militarisation of the geopolitical climate. The lack of transparency in many policy decisions breeds mistrust and discord that can lead to conflict [29]. The expert regional community has learned to find peaceful solutions to crisis situations, which demonstrates the peacebuilding potential of the leadership of these countries.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Konstantin Alekseevich Markelov.

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