

Same Same, but Different: Strategic Relations in the Russia-India- China-U.S. Quadrangle

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The Indo-American strategic partnership is a long-term trend that no one, including Russia, will be able to reverse. Russia must realize that the Indian political elites are expanding their contacts with the Americans not because of the “pressure from Washington,” but because, in their opinion, cooperation with the U.S. is in New Delhi’s national interests. At the same time, Moscow has the right to expect New Delhi to show a similar attitude towards the Russian-Chinese “relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction of a new era.”

In Russian-Indian relations, along with the historical achievements and successes of recent years, there have been many objective problems. They mainly relate to bilateral economic ties: low volumes of trade and investment activity, a focus on several key areas (military-technical cooperation, nuclear energy, oil and gas sector), and a low awareness among private sector players regarding each other's markets.

These problems are surmountable. Russia's need for reliable foreign economic partners and the diversification of its economic ties enables the two countries to achieve a structural transformation of Russian-Indian relations. The development of similar strategies for overcoming global development imbalances, a common vision of technological development (including technology transfer and the establishment of joint ventures), and joint investments in R&D—all these steps will help the two countries not only remember the glorious past, but also look into the future together.

However, in recent decades, political challenges have been added to the economic challenges of the especially privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India: Moscow is concerned about the rapid development of relations between Washington and New Delhi.

The comprehensive global strategic partnership between India and the United States is a logical outcome of the evolution of Indian politics since the 1990s. The government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao began a gradual process of economic liberalization to make India an attractive object of foreign investment, since there was not enough financial capital within the country itself.

The "opening up" of the Indian economy to foreign investors continued under Prime Minister Narendra Modi: the "Make in India" initiative invited foreign manufacturers to locate their production facilities in this South Asian country. A kind of continuation of the initiative was the "Self-reliant India" (*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan*) program. On the one hand, it is aimed at achieving technological sovereignty, and on the other hand, it obliges foreign manufacturers to localize their production in India.

Despite the increase in the gross savings rate, India still needs foreign investment to accelerate industrial development and provide jobs for a growing population—these problems are considered existential in New Delhi. In this vein, the United States has become an uncontested partner for India—no other country has the amount of free capital that can satisfy Indian “appetites.”

The two countries’ economic interest in each other was superimposed by the political factor. India’s defeat in the Indo-China War of 1962 was a blow to New Delhi, from which the modern Indian political elite cannot recover. The rapid economic development of the PRC accompanied by an accelerated military build-up, has intensified alarmist sentiments in India.

New Delhi is especially concerned about the development of the PLA Navy. From India’s perspective, the Chinese want to achieve dominance in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, cooperation with the Americans within the “free and open Indo-Pacific” is seen by the Indians as one of the few ways to neutralize the threats to their security.

Moscow needs to realize that the Indian political elites are expanding their contacts with the Americans not because of the “pressure from Washington,” but because, in their opinion, cooperation with the U.S. is in New Delhi’s national interests. Attempts to convince them that they misunderstand their national interests will not only fail to bring results but will also harm Russian-Indian relations.

If such a perception becomes part of Russia’s mainstream political discourse, Moscow has the right to expect New Delhi to show a similar attitude towards the Russian-Chinese “relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction of a new era.”

Russia and China are neighbors with a long history of bilateral relations. The political elites of the Russian Federation and China have similar views on most global and regional problems, and economic cooperation between the countries is developing at a rapid pace. At the same time, “partnership without forming an alliance” is not directed

against third countries; it is intended solely to satisfy the national interests of Russia and China.

The strategic nature of relations, on the one hand, is intuitive and does not need further explanation. On the other hand, any strategic partnership is the result of long-term interaction; it is shaped under the influence of unique factors and cannot be reduced to a common denominator. This is worth remembering if anyone attempts to oppose strategic relationships in order to influence the perception of counterparts.

We should not forget about the undesirability of downplaying the importance of partners in their relations with third countries. The perception of any third power as a “junior partner” does not contribute to the development of constructive ties. Both Russia and India are pursuing an independent foreign policy based on their national interests. If this statement is relevant for bilateral relations, then any other interpretation outside of Russian-Indian relations cannot have the right to exist. Following this simple logic will save the elites of both countries from the fear of imaginary threats and allow them to develop a highly privileged strategic partnership.