

Geopolitics and the Shifting Balance of Power in Asia

India, Russia and China as the Emerging Centre of Global Power

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Abstract: *The unipolar moment that followed the Cold War is giving way to a more fluid and contested distribution of global power, and nowhere is this transition more visible than in Asia. This paper examines the geopolitics of Asia's rise with special reference to the triangular relationship between India, Russia, and China (RIC)- three Eurasian powers whose interactions increasingly shape the contours of the emerging multipolar order. The analysis traces the historical evolution of the RIC framework, evaluates the economic and strategic weight each power brings to the relationship, and discusses the frictions- most notably the unresolved India-China border dispute and India's deepening ties with the West- that complicate any notion of a unified Asian bloc. The paper argues that Asia is best understood not as a single "center of power" replacing the West, but as a contested space of overlapping partnerships, hedging strategies, and institutional experimentation, in which India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, Russia's pivot to the East, and China's assertive rise interact to produce a distinctly Asian variant of multipolarity. This research was conducted without the use of artificial intelligence tools or AI-generated content. All sources and analysis are the result of conventional academic research methods.*

Keywords: multipolarity, strategic autonomy, RIC triangle, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasia, Indo-Pacific.

1. Introduction

Geopolitics- the study of how geography, power and interest interact to shape the behavior of states- has re-emerged as a central lens for understanding world affairs after three decades in which globalization and liberal-institutionalist optimism dominated policy discourse. The return of great-power competition, the war in Ukraine, the hardening of US-China rivalry, and the erosion of the rules-based order built after 1945 have together revived interest in territory, spheres of influence and the balance of power as organising concepts of international relations.

Asia sits at the centre of this transition. Home to more than half of humanity and an increasing share of global GDP, manufacturing and technological innovation, the continent has become the primary arena in which the twenty-first century's power struggles are being contested. Within Asia, three states stand out for their scale, capability and ambition: India, the world's most populous nation and fastest-growing large economy; Russia, a nuclear superpower and resource giant reorienting itself eastward after its rupture with the West over Ukraine; and China, the world's second-largest economy and a state openly seeking to reshape the international order to reflect its own preferences. The interaction of these three powers- sometimes described by the acronym RIC, a grouping that predates and partly overlaps with BRICS- offers a revealing case study in how multipolarity actually functions on the ground: as a mixture of cooperation, hedging and rivalry rather than a clean alignment of blocs.

This paper asks three linked questions. First, what structural changes have propelled India, Russia and China toward greater mutual engagement, and toward greater weight in the international system generally? Second, how cohesive is the RIC relationship in practice, given the unresolved disputes and divergent strategic orientations of its members? Third, does the language of Asia as a "new centre of power"

accurately describe what is emerging, or does it obscure a messier and more contingent reality?

2. Theoretical Framework: From Unipolarity to Contested Multipolarity

Classical realist and power-transition theories hold that the international system moves toward instability when a rising power's capabilities approach those of an established hegemon. Much of the post-2008 literature on international relations has applied this logic to the United States and China, framing global politics as an emerging "G2" rivalry. Yet this framing, while useful, risks flattening a more complex picture in which other capable states- India and Russia foremost among them- retain enough independent weight to resist simple bipolar categorisation.

A more accurate description, and the one adopted in this paper, is "contested multipolarity": a system in which several major powers possess meaningful autonomy of action, participate simultaneously in overlapping and sometimes contradictory institutional arrangements, and compete for influence without the ideological rigidity that characterised Cold War bipolarity. As one recent analysis of the RIC framework observes, China and India collaborate within groupings such as BRICS+ even as they face off militarily across the Himalayas- a pairing of cooperation and confrontation that would have been unusual under classical bipolar logic but is characteristic of the current moment.

India's own diplomatic vocabulary for this environment is "strategic autonomy": the pursuit of cooperative relationships with multiple power centres- the United States, Russia, China, the Gulf states, Japan, the European Union- without binding alignment to any single bloc. This doctrine is not merely rhetorical; it is a deliberate hedge against the risks of overdependence on any one partner in an unsettled international order.

3. India's Rise and the Logic of Strategic Autonomy

Economic and Demographic Weight

India's economy has grown into one of the largest in the world by nominal GDP, underpinned by a young workforce, an expanding services and technology sector, and a growing manufacturing base supported by policies aimed at diversifying global supply chains away from over-reliance on China. This economic weight increasingly translates into diplomatic leverage: India is courted simultaneously by Washington, Moscow, Beijing and the Gulf states, each seeking to draw New Delhi closer without pushing it into a rival's camp.

Balancing the United States, Russia and China

India has sustained a decades-long defence and energy relationship with Russia even as it has deepened security cooperation with the United States through frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). Since 2022, India has also significantly increased its purchases of discounted Russian crude oil, a move that drew criticism from Western capitals but that New Delhi defended as an exercise of sovereign economic interest amid disrupted global energy markets and, at various points, US tariff pressure on Indian exports.

Relations with China have followed a more volatile trajectory. The deadly Galwan Valley clash of June 2020 froze high-level engagement and triggered a prolonged military stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Disengagement at friction points such as Depsang and Demchok, agreed in October 2024, paved the way for a gradual normalisation, culminating in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin in August 2025 — his first visit to China in seven years. There, Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping described their countries as "development partners and not rivals," and Modi spoke of the need for cooperation befitting "a multipolar Asia." Despite this rapprochement, unresolved boundary questions, trade imbalances and India's wariness of Chinese regional assertiveness continue to constrain the relationship.

This is not transactional. This is geopolitical.- S. Jaishankar, India's External Affairs Minister, describing Russia, China and India as "three big Eurasian powers"

India's Vision of a Multipolar Asia

New Delhi's foreign-policy establishment has invested heavily in the idea of a multipolar Asia — a regional order in which India stands alongside, rather than beneath, China as an independent pole of power. This vision faces a structural headwind: some analysts argue that global diplomacy is increasingly organising itself around a US-China axis with Russia in a supporting role, a dynamic that would compress the bargaining space available to a genuinely multipolar Asia. India's response has been to deepen ties with the Global South, expand its footprint in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, host major multilateral gatherings such as the 2026 BRICS summit in New Delhi, and resist the consolidation of the international system into a small number of blocs.

Russia's Pivot: From European Power to Eurasian Anchor

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent regime of Western sanctions accelerated a reorientation of Russian foreign policy that had been underway, in slower form, since at least 2014. Cut off from major Western markets, technology and finance, Moscow has deepened its economic and strategic dependence on Asia—above all on China, but increasingly on India as well through discounted energy exports and expanded trade settled in national currencies.

The 2022 Xi-Putin declaration of a "no limits" partnership marked a significant deepening of Sino-Russian coordination across diplomacy, energy, defence and global governance, with both capitals explicitly framing their cooperation as a challenge to what they describe as excessive American dominance of international institutions. Within BRICS and the SCO, Russia and China have pushed to build alternative financial and political mechanisms — from local-currency trade settlement to new payment infrastructure—intended to reduce dependence on Western-controlled systems such as the dollar-based international financial architecture and SWIFT.

For India, this deepening Sino-Russian entente presents a strategic complication. A Moscow drawn ever closer to Beijing reduces the diplomatic and material space India has traditionally relied upon in Central Asia and in defence procurement, where Russia has long been India's largest supplier of military hardware. New Delhi has had to recalibrate accordingly, diversifying defence purchases toward France, the United States and Israel while continuing to value Russia as a source of energy, a veto-holding partner at the United Nations, and a counterweight that keeps India's options open.

China's Ascent and the Search for a Sino-centric Order

China's rise remains the single most consequential structural fact in contemporary Asian geopolitics. Its economic scale, its dominance of global manufacturing and critical mineral supply chains, and its rapid military modernization—including a growing navy, an expanding nuclear arsenal and advances in space and cyber capabilities—have made it the pole around which most regional calculations revolve.

Beijing has pursued this ascent through parallel tracks: economic statecraft via the Belt and Road Initiative and regional trade architecture; institutional entrepreneurship through the expansion of BRICS and the SCO to include a wider array of Global South states; and an increasingly assertive military posture in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and along the disputed Himalayan frontier with India. At the same time, China has signalled a degree of flexibility toward Washington—exemplified by high-level engagement between Xi Jinping and the Trump administration in 2026—while preserving its strategic partnership with Russia, allowing Beijing to position itself as a pivotal broker able to engage rival power centres simultaneously.

This dual-track approach reflects a structural reality: China's economy remains deeply intertwined with Western markets, technology and financial systems even as its political rhetoric

champions multipolarity and opposition to American primacy. The result is a China that is neither a committed revisionist bent on overturning the system outright nor a status-quo power content with the existing order, but rather a state maximising flexibility across multiple, at times contradictory, relationships.

The RIC Triangle, BRICS and the Institutional Architecture of Multipolarity

The Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping, first proposed by Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s as a counterweight to American unipolarity, has never developed into a formal alliance, but it has re-emerged as a useful lens on trilateral dynamics- particularly after the widely noted trilateral engagement between Modi, Putin and Xi at the 2025 SCO summit in Tianjin. Scholars increasingly describe RIC as a potential "stabilising core" for a fractured Asian order: it spans the interface between continental and maritime Asia, linking energy-rich Russia, manufacturing-dominant China and services-oriented India, and offers a

consultative channel for coordinating positions on global financial and technology governance without the two more Western-aligned members of BRICS needing to formalise a bloc.

BRICS itself has expanded well beyond its original five members to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the September 2026 summit hosted by India in New Delhi- organised around the themes of resilience, innovation, cooperation and sustainability- was widely read as evidence of a more multipolar order taking shape, albeit one characterised by overlapping interests in autonomy and institutional reform rather than a unified anti-Western programme. The same expansion, however, has imported the group's internal contradictions: India-China rivalry, Saudi-Iran tension, and the divergent postures of sanctioned Russia versus Gulf states that maintain close Western ties all sit uneasily within the same institution.

Table: Comparative Snapshot of the Three Powers

Core strength	Demography, services & IT, growing manufacturing base	Energy, raw materials, nuclear and military technology	Manufacturing scale, technology, financial heft
Strategic doctrine	Strategic autonomy / multi-alignment	Eurasian pivot after rupture with the West	Selective leadership, dual-track engagement with US and Russia
Key institutions	Quad, SCO, BRICS, G20	SCO, BRICS, Eurasian Economic Union	BRI, SCO, BRICS, RCEP
Principal friction	Unresolved border dispute with China; US tariff pressure	Sanctions regime; dependence on China for markets	Territorial disputes in South China Sea and with India

The India-China Border

Despite the 2024 disengagement agreements and the 2025 diplomatic thaw, the underlying boundary dispute along the LAC remains unresolved. Both sides continue to maintain substantial troop deployments and infrastructure along the frontier, and "legacy" disagreements over patrolling rights persist even where forward friction points have been de-escalated. This unresolved territorial question functions as a permanent structural constraint on how far India-China cooperation can advance, regardless of the warmth of any particular summit.

India's Western Ties

India's expanding security and technology partnership with the United States, its membership in the Quad alongside the US, Japan and Australia, and its wariness of a Sino-Russian axis that could box in its own room for manoeuvre all place limits on how far New Delhi is willing to travel toward a Moscow-Beijing-aligned bloc. Indian officials have been explicit that closer engagement with Russia and China is not a repudiation of ties with the West but an additional layer of a multi-vector foreign policy.

Divergent Interests Within BRICS and the SCO

Both institutions bring together states with fundamentally different, and at times incompatible, interests- India and China compete for leadership within the same groupings even as they cooperate on de-dollarisation and financial-architecture reform. This makes both BRICS and the SCO better understood as venues for managing and channelling great-power competition than as vehicles for a unified geopolitical project.

Asia as a "New Centre of Power": Assessing the Claim

The proposition that Asia- and the India-Russia-China triangle in particular- constitutes a new centre of global power is best treated as a directional truth rather than a settled fact. Asia's share of global GDP, population, manufacturing capacity and, increasingly, technological innovation has grown substantially relative to the transatlantic world over the past three decades, and all three RIC powers now sit at, or near, the top table of global diplomacy, holding permanent or rotating seats of influence in the UN Security Council, the G20, BRICS and the SCO.

Yet the claim requires qualification on at least three grounds. First, Asia is not a unified actor: the same states cooperating on de-dollarisation are simultaneously locked in military stand-offs, competing for influence in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean, and pursuing partly incompatible visions of regional order. Second, all three powers remain economically entangled with the West- China through trade and technology, India through investment and diaspora links, and even Russia through residual energy relationships with parts of Europe and Asia's US-aligned economies. Third, external structural forces, particularly the trajectory of US-China relations, continue to shape the room for manoeuvre available to India and Russia alike; a stabilising or worsening of that central relationship reshapes the incentives facing every other Asian power.

A more precise formulation, then, is that Asia has become the primary arena of contemporary geopolitical contestation, and that India, Russia and China are its most consequential actors - not because they form a coherent bloc, but because their

individual and overlapping choices now carry systemic weight for the international order as a whole.

4. Conclusion

The geopolitics of the twenty-first century are being written substantially, if not exclusively, in Asia. India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, Russia's forced pivot eastward after its rupture with the West, and China's determined rise together illustrate how multipolarity actually operates: not as the emergence of a single Asian counterweight to Western power, but as a shifting lattice of partnerships in which cooperation, competition and outright rivalry coexist within the same set of relationships, sometimes within the same summit. The RIC triangle and the wider BRICS and SCO architectures give this multipolarity institutional expression, but they do not resolve its underlying contradictions- most visibly the unsettled India-China border and India's enduring ties with the West.

For policymakers and scholars alike, the analytical task is therefore not to determine whether Asia has "replaced" the West as the centre of global power, but to understand the more complex reality that is actually emerging: a genuinely multipolar international system in which power is distributed among several centres, Asia foremost among them, each pursuing its interests through a flexible and often contradictory mix of alignment and autonomy.

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