Russian-Indian Relations amid the “Radical Transformation of the World Order”

The visit of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to India scheduled for December 6, is poised to become a significant event which will undoubtedly have a serious impact not only on the development of the bilateral relations, but also on the ongoing “radical transformation of the world order.”

Such an assessment of the upcoming trip of the Russian leader is underpinned by quite obvious reasons. The author would like also to highlight that India has been gradually moving to join a narrow pool of leading world powers since, as it seems, the end of the Cold War.

It was then, in the early 1990s, that India found itself in a totally different environment. The Soviet Union, India’s former go-to partner, collapsed almost instantly while its successor Russia engaged in “returning to the civilized path of development” and started to “integrate into Europe.” This chain of events put the nation on the verge on self-destruction.

Watching (ostensibly, with great dismay) its former key ally as well as neighboring burgeoning China (that has become the main partner of hostile Pakistan), India, after some hesitation, found no other way but to pivot to the US, its strategic Cold War rival. All this led to quite a positive response starting in the early 2000s, which resulted, in particular, in the visit of the US president Bill Clinton to India in March 2000.
In the next twenty years, the US-Indian rapprochement, with some fluctuations, (due to the partisan reshuffles in the Indian government) generally developed in an upward direction. The current high-level relations are confirmed by the fact that India and the US are parts of two “quadruple” interstate structures. The first one (QUAD-1) also includes Japan and Australia, while the second one comprises Israel and United Arab Emirates. Both of them, but especially the first one, are quite obviously anti-Chinese in nature.

It is worth noting, however, that India has not refused to mend ties with Russia that had previously collapsed. It is to India that the Russian military-industrial complex pretty much owns its survival since the Indian government placed several orders in the late 1990s. But compared to the Cold War era, the framework of bilateral ties basically narrowed down to the arms deals. It is a sphere of a great significance, of course, but it cannot be a substitute for all the others in the architecture of relations between countries of such level of importance as India and Russia.

However, the “rebuilding” of bilateral relations will be now developing in a fundamentally different foreign policy environment that stands in a stark contrast with the Cold War era. This will require both Russia and India to embrace at least the same, or even a better level of innovation in their approach to this process.

The main difference of the emerging geopolitical landscape is the “multipolar world”, or the presence of several centers of traction pulling in most “other” actors. Meanwhile, in the relations between these “center-poles” some rather sustainable trends have been outlined.

One of them, namely the US-Indian rapprochement, has already been mentioned. Another one, no less important, is the Sino-Russian rapprochement forming a strategic configuration, back-to-back style. The third one, which has become the focal point of the “Grand World Politics”, is linked to the aggravation of the competitive positioning of the two leading world actors — the US and China.

Delhi and Moscow ought to take into account all these trends while “rebuilding” bilateral relations, including the interest of both parties in reducing tensions in the China-US relations.

In other words, it is impossible to embark on the strategy of developing Russian-Indian relations outside the context of the “radical transformation of the world order.” In the current conditions the direction of this strategy would be ideal if it were to eventually result in the formation of a balanced system of relations between all significant actors that would take into account their vital interests.

This “common system” does not have anything to do, of course, with the bogus concept of Yalta-2, by default implying the partition of the world’s political stage into spheres of influence between the above-mentioned “pool” of leading world powers. Due to the same considerations, the concept of “the community of democratic states” should also be off the table.

Meanwhile, given the factor of the multipolar modern world, the concept of a “common system” envisages cooperation between all the powers in the entirety of the geopolitical arena. During this work the roadblocks in the participants’ relations, that would inevitably emerge in the process, will be resolved.

Alas, for now, the chances for creating such a “common system” are quite slim. In this respect, the recent appearance of a global project is worth noting, dubbed Build Back Better World (B3W). It has been initiated during the latest G7 summit that was held on June 11-13, at the Carbis Bay resort in Cornwall, United Kingdom. It has been proposed to spend $40 trillion for the purpose of “building” the infrastructure, mainly in the developing countries.

Apart from the ambiguity of the answer to the question of where such a spectacular sum could be fundraised, this project should be only applauded. Unless it is blatantly anti-Chinese in its nature, since it had been mentioned in the text of the above-mentioned document (and also alluded in the remarks by the US president three months earlier as a counter project to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

It should be noted that the latter has been in progress for quite some time, and its success accounts for the increase of China’s political influence in the so called third world countries. This is confirmed, in particular, by the results of the recent regular Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) that deserves, however, a separate comment.

Envy is generally a bad quality. In this case it is also counterproductive if the stated main purpose of the B3W project is taken into account, which is allegedly to aid the above-mentioned countries (in reality it is just repayment of historical debts, though). In such a noble cause, the efforts should be joined, not separated. Much less should they be antagonized.
The complexity of the global political situation has been reflected in an indicative remark by Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar that he made during a recent event within the framework of the SCO as Moscow and Delhi are trying to build a new format of bilateral relations. In a reference to India’s possible joining the BRI, he said that such projects “must be transparent and conform to the most basic principle of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Commentators interpreted this phrase as an allusion to the problem of passing one of the main branches of the BRI through the territory that is now under Pakistani control, but disputed by India.

Along with difficulties of a more or less objective nature, which are brought into focus by the same process of “radical transformation of the world order”, long-standing values are upended as the acts of state madness occur. The main international expansionists are fighting for “freedom” and universal observance of “norms of democracy and human rights.” Rational and pedantic Germany elects and appoints to government potential grave diggers for its own economy, its main source of prosperity and an increasingly strong position on the world stage. Those are the same grave diggers who had ruined fairly “green” nuclear power industry which never really vanished since the same “atomic electricity” is simply purchased in neighboring France.

India and Russia will have to build bilateral relations in a world that finds itself in a state which is far away from the desirable format of the “common system” and common sense.

No small feat, to say the least.

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