

BRICS summit riven by geo-political rivalry

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26 October 2016

Held in Goa, India on the weekend of Oct. 15-16, the summit meeting of the heads of government of the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) was the occasion for a huge amount of diplomatic maneuvering and wrangling.

The summit concluded with the issuing of a statement that claimed BRICS is a “strategic partnership” bound together by “solidarity and cooperation.” In reality, the cut-throat maneuvering during and around the summit testified to the explosive character of contemporary world geo-politics, particularly under conditions where the US is pursuing military-strategic offensives against nuclear-armed Russia and China.

At its establishment in 2009, BRICS was touted as a bloc of the leading “developing” countries that could act as an economic and geo-political counterweight to Washington and Wall Street, and more generally the imperialist powers.

Seven years on, this has been exposed as an illusion. Most of the BRICS countries are mired in deep economic crisis due to the collapse of the commodity-price boom, which is itself bound up with the dramatic slowing of economic growth in China. Moreover, the most powerful BRICS states, China, Russia and India, are pursuing different and to a large degree opposed geo-political agendas.

Most significant is the dramatic intensification of the strategic competition between India and China.

Under Narendra Modi and his 27-month-old BJP government, India has become a veritable “frontline” state in Washington’s drive to strategically isolate, encircle and prepare for war with China. New Delhi has opened India’s military bases to routine use by US warplanes and warships; expanded bilateral and trilateral military-strategic cooperation with America’s principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia; and repeatedly parroted Washington’s provocative stance on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The US has reciprocated by proclaiming India a “major defense partner,” thereby giving it access to the Pentagon’s most advanced weapons systems.

In response to the burgeoning Indo-US “global strategic” partnership, China has expanded its longstanding strategic ties with India’s arch-rival, Pakistan.

India was determined to use the BRICS summit to advance its campaign to isolate, bully and threaten Pakistan, including having it labeled a “state sponsor” of terrorism and internationally ostracized. Claiming that Islamabad was responsible for the Sept. 18 attack on the Uri military base in Indian-held Kashmir, the Modi government ordered military strikes inside Pakistan little more than two weeks before the Goa summit. It then boasted that the strikes had inflicted “heavy casualties” on anti-Indian Islamist “terrorists” and their Pakistani “protectors.”

Modi, in his capacity of summit chairman, placed “terrorism” at the center of the BRICS deliberations and various meetings held on the summit’s margins. On the first day of the summit, India’s prime minister made an obvious and highly provocative reference to Pakistan when he said that the “mother-ship of terrorism” was situated in South Asia. The next day, he was even more forthright. “Tragically,” declared Modi, “the mother-ship of terrorism is a country in India’s neighborhood. ... Terror modules around the world are linked to this mother-ship. This country shelters not just terrorists. It nurtures a mindset. A mindset that loudly proclaims that terrorism is justified for political gains. ... BRICS must speak in one voice against this threat.”

Modi subsequently told a BRICS “outreach” session to which India’s partners in the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand) had been invited, that terrorism is Pakistan’s “favorite child.” Islamabad, he continued, must be sent a “clear message”: mend “its ways or be isolated in the civilized world.”

The Goa summit declaration denounced terrorism at length and promised that the BRICS states will increase their cooperation to fight it. However, the declaration made no reference to the attack on the Uri military base or to “cross-border” terrorism, prompting much angry commentary in the Indian press.

Modi has been encouraged in his hardline stance against Islamabad by the strong backing that the US and other major powers, including Germany and Russia, have given India’s “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan.

Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had a testy bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit. Xi refused to drop China's opposition to India joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which governs nuclear trade, or its "technical" hold on New Delhi's efforts to have Masood Azhar, the leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (J-e-M), a Pakistan-based Islamist militia, placed on the UN "terrorist" blacklist.

It is not known if Modi and Xi discussed the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a series of transport and pipeline links between western China and Gwadar, an Arabian Sea port in Pakistan's southwestern province, Balochistan. However, in recent months New Delhi has bitterly denounced the CPEC, claiming that it will go through parts of Pakistan that are rightfully Indian. And, in a move aimed at both destabilizing Pakistan and thwarting the CPEC, New Delhi has recently signaled its support for the nationalist-separatist insurgency in Balochistan.

While en route to Goa, Xi visited Bangladesh and announced billions of dollars in loans and investments as part of Beijing's "One Belt One Road" initiative, which aims to develop energy and transport infrastructure across Eurasia. It was not lost on India's increasingly bellicose media that Xi was able to trump several times over the \$2 billion credit line that Modi announced for Bangladesh when he visited Dacca in March.

Probably the most significant geo-political development in Goa was the attempt of Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin to revive the longstanding, but increasingly frayed, strategic partnership between New Delhi and Moscow.

Russia was India's most important military-strategic partner during the Cold War and the alliance with Russia remains vital for India's nuclear program and military. However, India's ever-deepening alliance with Washington, including major US weapons purchases, has rattled Moscow, especially since the 2014 US-led regime change operation in Ukraine, the subsequent NATO build up on Russia's borders, and the intensifying US-Russian conflict over Syria.

Moscow has attempted to signal its concerns to New Delhi through a limited rapprochement with Pakistan. Russia recently sold attack helicopters to Pakistan, in a first-ever arms deal with Islamabad, and in September Russia and Pakistan held their first-ever joint military exercise.

Meeting in Goa for the annual India-Russia heads of government summit, both Modi and Putin went out of their way to emphasize the strength and unique importance of the Indo-Russian strategic alliance.

In an attempt to shore it up, they announced billions of dollars' worth of arm sales and energy deals.

Russia will sell India its most advanced surface-to-air

missile system and stealth frigates. The two countries will also jointly produce helicopters.

India is allowing the majority Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft to take a controlling stake in India's Essar Oil and related port facilities. The deal is the largest ever foreign takeover of an Indian company and constitutes a major boost to Russia's economy, which has been hard-hit by Western sanctions and low oil prices.

Through video-conferencing Modi and Putin laid the foundation for the third and fourth units of the Russian-built Kudankulam nuclear power plant. Earlier in the week the plant's second reactor had been hooked up to India's electricity grid. Putin said Russia is ready to build a dozen more nuclear power plants in India over the next two decades.

After his talks with Putin, Modi characterized India's relationship with Russia as "truly unique and privileged." He also reiterated India's stand on Syria, which is at odds with that of the US, although not directly supportive of Russia's military intervention. Expressing his delight with India's stance, Putin said, "We are conducting a comprehensive dialogue on a wide scale of international issues, in which Indian and Russian approaches are close to each other or coincide."

Putin was at pains to downplay the significance of Moscow's recent overtures to Islamabad and reiterate Moscow's strong support for India's purported "anti-terrorist" strikes in Pakistan.

"Russia's clear stand on the need to combat terrorism mirrors our own," declared Modi.

India is eager to maintain close strategic ties with Russia as a counterweight to China and to preserve some room for maneuver in its increasingly close and dependent alliance with US imperialism. However, Washington has repeatedly signaled that its long-term goal aim is to degrade and break the Indo-Russian partnership—to bring India's geo-political posture in alignment with its own not just in respect to China, but also Russia and the Middle East.



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