

India-Russia Relations and the Strategic Environment in Eurasia

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In the changing dynamics of international politics set in motion by the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, there were paradigm shifts in the nature of relations among countries. India and the Russian Federation, however, were soon able to find a new basis for reestablishing their close and friendly relations. Within a span of nine years, Indo-Russian relations have evolved into a strategic partnership. This implies a qualitative higher level of relationship reflecting mutual trust and confidence. Generally, it has been observed that whenever the geopolitical and strategic interests of two countries coincide, the ensuing relationship between them is often warm, close and friendly. The crux of Indo-Russian relations also lies in the compatibility of their vital interests at the regional level—Central Asia, the center of Eurasia. It was this compatibility of geopolitical and strategic interests that augured well for Indo-Soviet ties in the past, although the context was different, and augurs well now for Indo-Russian ties.

The regional scenario, however, has been undergoing swift changes. Eurasia has been attracting world attention. Several factors explain this shift in focus towards Eurasia. With oil politics and energy security occupying the center stage of international politics, the abundant natural resources of Eurasia including energy sources has drawn a lot of external attention. The scramble to control these vital resources, the efforts to provide alternate transport routes and corridors to most of the landlocked

countries of the region, and the propagation of “forced” democracy in the post-Soviet space are various dimensions of the competition that has emerged among major powers. It is primarily between the West, particularly the US, on the one hand and Russia in partnership with China on the other hand competing for control and influence in Eurasia. What has complicated the competition is the emergence of Afghanistan as the hub of international terrorism and religious extremism under the Taliban. While the Taliban have been defeated, the danger of terrorism and extremism continues in the region. Reports suggest that several extremist groups have reemerged and that Iraq is gradually emerging as a center for terrorist activity. Thus, the regional scenario has been in a state of constant flux. For Indo-Russian relations, the regional context presents not only new challenges to their relationship, but new opportunities as well. In order to analyze India’s relations with Russia, an examination of the strategic environment in Eurasia is necessary.

Strategic Environment in Eurasia

In the post-Cold War era, one of the distinctive features to emerge was that security could no longer be interpreted in narrow terms or exclusively military terms. New challenges have arisen. These are primarily religious extremism, terrorism and aggressive nationalism. These new sources of non-traditional threat pose a serious challenge to the integrity and sovereignty particularly of multiethnic states and pluralist societies. Both India and Russia are multiethnic and pluralist societies. These non-traditional sources of threat manifested themselves in the most prominent manner in India’s neighborhood. India was already battling against extremism and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, and the appearance of these forces in its neighborhood exacerbated the situation. A noteworthy development that coincided was the unexpected emergence of the Central Asian states as independent entities. This widened India’s sphere of geopolitical and strategic interest. Even in the past, the Central Asian region was important for India, but Indian concerns were taken care of by friendly Indo-Soviet ties. In the changed context of 1991, India began to look upon the five states of Central Asia as part of its “extended neighborhood.” Since the majority of the people of Central Asia are Muslim, they began to attract attention, and Indian interest lay primarily

in seeing that the secular orientation of the Central Asian states remain intact.

However, Indian concerns arose when the government of President Mohammad Najibullah was overthrown by the forces of religious extremism led by Burhanuddin Rabbani. The success of the Mujahideens in 1992 was the first victory of religious extremism, and this was the beginning of Afghanistan's emergence as the hub of extremism and terrorism. India's view that Afghan developments could cast their shadow over the newly independent states of Central Asia was not unfounded. Mosques, madrassahs and theological schools sprang up, and religious practices were being observed with great fervor. The beginning of the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992 signaled a new phase in the growth of religious extremism. The devastating civil war in Tajikistan lasted for five years (1992–1997). The opposition sought refuge in Afghanistan. Here, all help and cooperation was extended by the Rabbani government in terms of safe sanctuary, training, and financial support. Importantly, the religious leaders and others gained vast experience in the political and military struggles.

From an Indian perspective, the most worrisome aspect was Pakistan's activities in Afghanistan, and its increasing interest in Central Asia. Initially, Pakistan pursued a religious agenda in Central Asia in order to acquire "strategic depth." Pakistan's objective was not simply to bring the states of Central Asia within the fold of Islam, but it also wanted to emerge as a bridge between Central Asia and the rest of the world, in short, to create a strategic integrated region with religious orientation. India's unease about Pakistan's activities in Central Asia was put to rest when the leaders of Central Asia adopted a stringent attitude towards extremism, and in fact took strong measures to curb all such activities. With the rise of the Taliban and its avowal to spread its ideology to Central Asia, Indian concerns increased phenomenally. In Indian thinking, "The September 1996 offensive of the Taliban that overthrew the Rabbani government and captured Kabul was believed to have been part of Pakistan's larger game plan to extend her influence in Central Asia."¹ The Kargil War of 1999 is an eloquent testimony to the fact that extremism and cross-border terrorism was escalating. Indian concerns were heightened because the newly independent states of Central Asia were

¹ Ministry of Defense, Government of India, *Annual Report*, 1995–1996.

weak. They had to build up polities as well as to have armed forces. Until that time, they were dependent on Russia for their security requirements. Had the forces of religious extremism and terrorism succeeded in the region, the geopolitics of Eurasia would probably have undergone a fundamental change.

Indian vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the non-traditional threats received full support and understanding from Russia. In fact, Russia too was facing similar challenges in Chechnya. Russian interests lay in insulating Central Asia from the divisive tendencies emanating from Afghanistan. As aptly stated by Georgii Kunadze, the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, "Russia has a specific geopolitical interest in Central Asia, which is to prevent the explosive charge of Islamic extremism from penetrating into the country."² Hence, protection of the southern periphery of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) came to have strategic significance for Russia. Indian and Russian interests lay in ensuring the stability and security of the Central Asian region. The existing regimes should not in their view be overthrown by forces of extremism. It must be pointed out that, at that juncture, the problem was region specific and that the military presence of a Russian led peacekeeping force on the Tajik-Afghan border was able to protect and safeguard the region. Given its friendly ties with Russia, India favored Russia being the sole guarantor of security and stability in the region.

The military presence of the international coalition forces led by the US in the wake of the events of 9/11, by terrorists fundamentally altered the geopolitical situation in the Central Asian region. The fight against terrorism that had so far had a regional dimension now came to occupy the center stage of international politics. The Taliban has been defeated, but the Saudi fugitive Osama bin Laden remains elusive. The al Qaeda terrorist network has been largely destroyed, but reports suggest that they have reemerged and are now operating from Iraq as well. The war against terror is continuing. It is possible that the war could be a protracted one, which means the military presence of the coalition forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere could also be long drawn. Whether the military presence of

² Vera Kuznetsova, "The Foreign Ministry's Policy: Between Fatal Inevitability and Probability; interview with the deputy minister of foreign affairs, Georgii Kunadze," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 29, 1993 (English translation in *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* [hereafter referred to as *CDPSP*] 45, no. 30: 10–12).

the coalition forces has a hidden agenda as Russia and China believe is difficult to say. But there is no doubt that competition to control the resources of Eurasia and reduce Russian influence has acquired a new edge especially after the US-led military intervention in Iraq in 2003. This aspect will be discussed later in the article.

Besides, in the wake of 9/11, there was a change in all five Central Asian states. All the states not only supported the campaign against terrorism, but willingly offered military and base facilities to the forces. American troops were stationed at Khanabad or the K-2 air base in Uzbekistan, and the Friendship Bridge that connects it with northern Afghanistan was also made available. Due to deterioration in their relations, Uzbekistan asked the US to vacate the military base. In November 2005, the remaining American troops departed from Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan had opened its Manas air base to the US. In Tajikistan are stationed coalition forces from France and the UK. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have also offered logistical help to the coalition forces. Several factors account for the willing cooperation on the part of the Central Asian states. Firstly, the sense of vulnerability of the Central Asian states increased especially after the Taliban came to power. Perhaps it was felt that the existing security arrangement under the Collective Security Treaty (CST) was inadequate. As a perceptive Uzbek observer said, “. . . the majority of the public regards the American military presence as a gift from Allah.” The reasoning behind this attitude is primitively simple. “Russia has no money to protect us. Protecting themselves is something people here aren’t used to.”³ Besides, the economic assistance that these countries would receive would be helpful. Importantly, it would give the Central Asian states the necessary space for maneuverability vis-à-vis Russia.

India has supported the military presence of international coalition forces and welcomed the defeat of the Taliban. Despite five years of continuous campaigning against extremism and terrorism, the terrorist infrastructure has not been completely uprooted. Several outlawed groups have reappeared, for example, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan now operates as the Islamic Movement of Turkestan. The recent blast in Mumbai (July 2006) is a poignant reminder of the inhuman activities of the jihad groups. A related issue that is becoming more pronounced in

³ *CDPSP* 53, no. 42: 17.

recent times is the flourishing trade in narcotics, and the enhanced activities of organized crime. These negative tendencies sustain extremism and terrorism. The instability in Afghanistan helps to perpetuate such activities.

Another complicating factor from the Indian perspective is that the competition among major powers in its area of strategic interest is becoming strident. US-Russian competition became evident at the Budapest Summit in 1994. Russian hopes of being accepted as an equal partner by the West were in vain. An era of “Cold Peace,” as described by Russian president Boris Yeltsin, was beginning. According to Dmitri Trenin, “There was an over-abundance of optimism on both sides.”⁴ There were inherent limitations in Russia being accepted as an equal partner by the West. Two factors in this context are important. One was the decision of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to expand eastwards, in the direction of Russia’s periphery. The decision to invite countries of the former socialist bloc was perceived in Russia highly negatively. Second, the issue of energy security acquired a new urgency. The opening line of the Joint Statement on the New US-Russian Energy Dialogue of May 2002, “Successful development of the global economy depends on timely and reliable energy delivery,” succinctly highlighted the strategic importance of this resource.⁵ The energy resources in Eurasia, particularly in the Caspian Sea basin, drew considerable external attention. The American approach was spelt out by the then deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott who said that the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia should be independent, prosperous and secure. This would widen the area of stability in a strategically vital region that borders China, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan.⁶

On the other hand, Russia considered the post Soviet space as its zone of special interest. Russia has deep and vital interests at stake in the

⁴ Carl Conetta, “NATO Expansion: Costs and Implications” (presentation to the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility, The Project on Defense Alternatives, The Commonwealth Institute, Cambridge, MA USA, July 23, 1998), www.comw.org/pda/nato699.html.

⁵ Bush-Putin Joint Statement on New US-Russian Energy Dialogue, May 24, 2002. Issued by the International Information Programs of the US Department of State.

⁶ Strobe Talbott, speech delivered at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, John Hopkins University, September 1997, *Strategic Digest* (New Delhi).

region. In the words of former Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov, “The situation in the former Soviet Union was vitally important to Russia’s economy, defense and security and to the rights of Russian citizens outside Russia.”⁷ These conflicting interests triggered the competition often interpreted as the “great game.” This is indeed a debatable point. The following report in *The Times of Central Asia* has probably put the entire question into the right perspective. “The new Great Game is all about oil and gas. The imperial soldiers and spies of a bygone era have given way to engineers and deal makers as the states jockey for the lucrative business of building pipelines to tap the vast resources of the landlocked region.”⁸

This competitive aspect paved the way for cooperation after the events of 9/11. Russia gave tacit approval to the Central Asian states to grant military base facilities to the coalition forces. It was understood that this military presence was specifically for fighting the war on terror. Russia felt that the cooperative aspect would help in intensifying US-Russian interaction in various fields, especially in the economic sphere. The situation began to change after the US military intervention in Iraq without UN approval. Many in Russia felt that the West, particularly the US, was pursuing a hidden agenda, one of controlling the resources of the region, and limiting and, if possible, eliminating Russian influence. According to Russian general Leonid Ivashov, now vice-president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, “Russia faced a political paradox at the turn of the century. By supporting the US-led struggle against international terrorism, Russia has also complicated its position in the CIS countries.” In his view, the Central Asian leaders have made a mistake by inviting US-led coalition forces.⁹ Since 2003, Russia has been making determined efforts to restore its influence in Central Asia. The thrust of its policy is economic, military and political. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) comprising of Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan has emerged as a proactive military grouping in the region. The CSTO has a base in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the Russian military presence is

⁷ *The Times of Central Asia* (Bishkek), February 5, 2004.

⁸ *The Times of Central Asia*., January 3, 2002.

⁹ Leonid Ivashov, “Russian General Comments on Topical Geo-Political Issues,” *Daily Review (RIA Novosti, Moscow)*, January 22, 2002.

substantial. In fact, it is a projection of power rather than meeting the security challenges of the region. While military presence is necessary, the targets are nevertheless on the ground and are dispersed.

But what has accentuated the present phase of the competition is the Western support of the “color revolution.” In the view of Evgenii Primakov, former prime minister of Russia, “various US foundations and diplomats were involved quite openly in the so-called color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. This fact cannot but worry us.”¹⁰ There is a widespread perception that events of March 2005 in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan events of May 2005 had an external hand. Whether this is true or not is a moot point, but the fact is that all the Central Asian countries turned to Russia for help. It greatly facilitated Russia’s restoration of its influence in the region. Consequently, in July 2005 at the summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Astana, the US was asked to announce a time frame for the withdrawal of its forces from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

A new factor in this competition is the role of China. The Chinese have geopolitical interests in Central Asia. Their concern is that China’s borders with the three Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—remain peaceful. The Chinese concern is largely for its Uyghur minority located in Xinjiang. China has established close and strategic ties with Russia. Both countries realize that a collective or a multilateral approach is necessary in order to protect their interests. In this regard, Russian and Chinese views concur on many issues of regional and international politics. China is highly circumspect about the Western military presence at Manas in Kyrgyzstan. The Manas air base is 200 kilometers from the Chinese border. The SCO, a Chinese initiative, is emerging as a proactive and leading regional grouping in the region. Another dimension that has emerged in China’s policy towards Central Asia is its quest to ensure energy security. China has intensified its interaction with Kazakhstan, an energy-rich country, and has concluded several agreements in this regard. China’s aspiration is also to play a role in Caspian Sea politics. This dimension could assume significance in the future. China is also highly circumspect about a possible color revolution

¹⁰ Evgeny Primakov, “Russia and the U.S. in Need of Trust and Cooperation,” *Russia in Global Affairs* (Moscow) 4, no. 1 (2006): 136.

affecting the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region. As it is, they are restive, non-Han Chinese Muslims of Jurik stock.

Despite these setbacks and the concerted efforts of Russia and China to meet the challenge of the competition, the US is not likely to withdraw from the region. Its latest thinking indicates that the US would encourage and promote greater links between the region (Central Asia) and South Asia, in which India could play a leading role. This is possible by exporting energy southward, and by transporting corridors and an electric grid connecting hydropower with South Asia. However, enhanced interaction with South Asia may not eliminate Russian influence, but could perhaps limit Chinese activity.

The strategic environment is undoubtedly in a state of flux. The competition to control resources and influence would continue to dominate US-Russian involvement in Eurasia. But this competition would be low key, for both sides are likely not to allow the situation to escalate to the point of hostility. From the Indian perspective, it acts as a restraint on its aspiration to play an effective role in Central Asia. Given the past historical and cultural affinity and its present image as a reliable partner, India would have to make serious efforts to establish its presence in the region. However, two important developments in this context are worth mentioning. One is that China has shown keenness to engage with India. India's interaction with China encompasses various fields. Recently, a top official of the People's Liberation Army said that India and China were moving in the direction of sustaining peace and stability in their neighborhood and not just on their frontiers. "We have a long history and share a lot of common ground," he said. Secondly, there is a marked improvement in India's relations with the US. This is partly because of India's rising international profile and partly because the South Asian focus on US foreign policy has acquired a new dimension. The US would like India to play a leading and substantial role in the region. All these developments have put new strains on Indo-Russian relations. But in the view of the author, the core of Indo-Russian relations have not been disturbed in a major way. The regional context has undergone a change with Russia placing greater emphasis on a multilateral approach, and, to an extent, it has diluted the regional basis; nevertheless, within the changed context, new areas of cooperation do exist. We now turn to them.

Indo-Russian Relations and the Regional Context

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was uncertainty about the future of India's relations with the Russian Federation. Indian concern was whether the special relations it enjoyed would undergo a change or not. Immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was a debate even in Russia about its future policy towards South Asia. There was a view that Russian policy should be equidistant, in which both India and Pakistan enjoyed the same emphasis. Hence, in the early years, Russian policy towards India was one of benign neglect. This phase soon gave way, and in January 1993, during President Yeltsin's visit to India, the earlier treaty was replaced by a new one: The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. However, it was with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Russia in June 1994 that Indo-Russian ties were put on a firm foundation. "The Moscow Declaration on the Protection of Interests of Pluralist States" signed by India and Russia has become the bedrock of the relations. The Declaration drew attention not only to the nature of the challenges faced by the two countries, but also focused attention on the source from which this threat emanated for both. It also reiterated support of the signatories for each other's territorial integrity. This is highly important given the fact that India and Russia were battling with these challenges in Kashmir and Chechnya, respectively. In the changed context, it was the space that lay between India and Russia that acquired significance. Once again, it was the commonality of their geopolitical interests that paved the way for the relationship to become strong and stable. Later, India and Russia backed opposition to the Taliban that had crystallized into the Northern Alliance. On the issue of religious extremism and terrorism, India and Russia share many commonalities: the source of tension, funding, training, etc. India and Russia wanted a secular Central Asia working towards a democratic setup. From this perspective, stability and security were important. Instability hampers growth and helps in sustaining extremism and terrorism to an extent. Consequently, India and Russia have established institutional linkages to strengthen this aspect. To date, this commonality has not diminished. Russia views India as a major regional power whose involvement in international politics would make a positive contribution.

From Russia's vantage point, the unfolding developments in Europe, Eurasia, and the energy security issue were reminiscent of the Cold War mindset. Its response was the propagation of the idea of a multipolar world. In this regard, a historic agreement with China on a "Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order" was signed in Moscow in April 1997. This was the beginning of a partnership with China. A multipolar world is an order that is just and fair and democratic in which all nations are considered as equals and more importantly, enjoy equal security. It is a world order in which there is no place for hegemony. In this order, the UN would occupy a position of centrality. On its part, India upheld that the world order was not a unipolar one, as new centers of power and influence were emerging. While acknowledging the need for a multipolar world, the Indian approach was not in terms of blocs, but the need to maintain a balanced and stable world order. Since a unipolar world could lead to instability, there was a need for a balancing force.

Among the other initiatives taken by Russia is the idea of an India-Russia-China strategic triangle, coming together in the interests of the challenges faced by them in the region. During Primakov's visit to India in December 1998, he proposed at an informal level that India-Russia-China should come together and form a strategic triangle in the interests of peace and stability in the region. The initial response of India was one of caution that could be explained by the fact that a strategic triangle implied common perceptions and convergence of interests vis-à-vis a common threat. Similarly, China expressed no opinion on this idea. One of the impacts of the events of 9/11 has been that China has developed a positive attitude towards the idea of trilateral cooperation. Possibly, the renewal of Pakistani-American cooperation could have had an impact on Chinese strategic thinking. It was perhaps with the idea of furthering the cause of trilateral cooperation that President Vladimir Putin embarked on his Asian tour by visiting China and later India in December 2002. In a TV interview, Primakov said, "It is shared interest in maintaining security and stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan that may give flesh and blood to the idea of a Moscow-Beijing-Delhi triangle."¹¹ The foreign ministers of the three countries have been meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss issues of common concern at the global and regional level. Issues such as energy security, trade and enhancing

¹¹ *The Hindu* (New Delhi), December 9, 2002.

contacts have been discussed. In May 2005, the foreign ministers of the three countries had their first full-fledged meeting.

As mentioned before, the turn of the century saw fundamental changes in the region. The Western military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia radically altered the geopolitical landscape. With the passage of time, Russia was convinced that a multilateral approach was best suited to the evolving situation. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in an interview said that multilateral approaches are the best solutions to global problems and regional conflicts.¹² With increasing focus on multilateral approaches, a regional grouping that has come into prominence is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Prior to the formation of the SCO in June 2001, it was known as the Shanghai Five with a limited agenda of maintaining peace and stability on the border and promoting a good neighborly attitude in the region. The Shanghai Five felt the need to transform itself into a regional grouping as the security problems in Central Asia became complicated and a collective approach was necessary. The SCO's agenda expanded to include security and economic issues.

The essence of the SCO lay in peace and good neighborly ties among the countries. The primary concern of China, an active participant of SCO, was the security of its periphery and its Xinjiang region. A declaration by the heads of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (June 7, 2002) stated that the SCO has been established with a view to strengthening mutual trust, friendship and good neighborliness.¹³ The objectives of the SCO were combating religious extremism, separatism, and terrorism, and, at the economic level, it meant energizing economic links. In August 2003, the first multilateral anti-terrorism military exercise was held within the framework of the SCO.

At the wider political level, the SCO has expressed its views on issues of international significance. For instance, a statement issued at the end of the St. Petersburg Summit in 2002 reiterated support for the One-China Policy and the principle that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China."¹⁴ Similarly, in a clear reference to the US-led war in Iraq, it was stated at the Moscow Summit in 2003 that "we have a common stance.

¹² *The Hindu*, October 11, 2004.

¹³ Jyotsna Bakshi, *Russia-China Relations Relevance for India* (New Delhi: Shipra, 2004), 303–309.

¹⁴ *The Times of Central Asia* (Bishkek), June 13, 2002, <http://www.times.kg>.

There is no alternative to the UN as a universal organization in an international system.”¹⁵

Although the SCO has emerged as a proactive and dynamic regional grouping, it nevertheless faces certain challenges. A great deal depends on the nature of Russia-China relations, the two most powerful players in SCO. In the opinion of the author, differences among them cannot be discounted. Similarly as the Russian and Central Asian societies evolve towards democracy and openness, albeit slowly, would their perception of SCO also undergo a change? Moreover, the SCO faces a challenge from the CSTO, of which Russia is an active member. The CSTO also espouses similar objectives. For the present, it seems that the SCO is not likely to expand its membership. Currently, there are India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan as countries with observer status in the SCO. India could play an effective role in the grouping. Firstly, India has a rich experience in multilateral diplomacy. After all, it was the founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. India has also been a member of G-77, South-South Cooperation, etc. Secondly, Indian experience in combating extremism, terrorism and separatism could be useful. Indian membership would certainly make it broad based, and given India’s rising profile, would certainly lend weight to the SCO. It appears that for China, the SCO is a tool to engage with Central Asia for the foreseeable future ensuring its core objective of maintaining peace, stability and good neighborliness on its common borders.

The CSTO, a Russian initiative, is also emerging as an active grouping, although its focus appears to be on military and vigorous defense cooperation among the member states. The CSTO is not likely to open its membership to states other than those of the post-Soviet space.

As mentioned, this emphasis on multilateralism has to an extent diluted the regional context of Indo-Russian relations, especially when India is not a full member of these regional groupings. India’s role is stymied in this situation. New areas of cooperation have nevertheless emerged. One area is joint cooperation in Central Asia. India and Russia stand to benefit by increasing their involvement in Central Asia. The systemic transformation in these countries is still incomplete. India-Russia cooperation in broadening the basis of the Central Asian states’ economy

¹⁵ “China Russia, Central Asian Nations Strengthen Ties (May 29, 2003),” *CDI Russia Weekly*, no. 259 (2003), www.cdi.org/russia.

is probable in the spheres of textiles or textile machinery, light industry, and agriculture in the use of new farming techniques. In addition, Central Asia's industrial base shows that light and food industries are common to all. This is followed by machine building, metal processing and ferrous metallurgy. Indian experience in operating a Soviet type of industrial infrastructure could be useful. At another level, Indian managerial skills can be matched with Russian expertise in upgrading, modernizing and building new enterprises in the medium- and small-scale sector. Indian and Russian cooperation in the energy sector as well as the defense industries located in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan could be accelerated. India has already invested nearly \$2.7 billion in the Sakhalin project on natural gas. Indian cooperation in building the export pipeline infrastructure holds significant promise.

Secondly, India-Russia cooperation in the developmental activities of Central Asia can be accelerated if they can provide the landlocked countries access to the outside world. In this regard, the North-South Corridor connecting St. Petersburg with Mumbai is the best option. The corridor, a combination of sea, rail, and road routes was planned in 2000 with Russia, Iran, and India agreeing to this ambitious project. Russia has already constructed a container terminal at Ol'ia and Makhachkala on the Caspian Sea. On July 1, 2003, Kazakhstan also joined the North-South Corridor, and one branch of the corridor now goes to Aktau on the Kazakh side of the Caspian Sea. From the Russian side, it is much easier and cheaper to provide this Eurasian region with goods from India than from Europe. Although the North-South Corridor is operational, it is not functioning up to the desired capacity. Difficulties need to be resolved.

In order to open the Siberian part of Russia, it is necessary to give this isolated region access to the outside world. This is possible if one branch of the Trans-Siberian (transsib) Railway from Omsk Oblast could be connected to Aktau in Kazakhstan. Such a proposition is not too difficult because Aktau is connected by a rail and road network. Kazakhstan, on the issue of a transport corridor, would certainly like to widen its options. Hence, it could be India-Iran-Kazakhstan and Russia (Omsk Oblast). It could give this region an outlet to the south. A whole new vista for Indian goods could open up not only in Central Asia but in Siberia as well. Landlocked Siberia would also be able to interact with Southeast Asia, Africa, etc. Importantly, the opening of the Siberian region via the North-South Corridor would facilitate Indian labor to go to

the region. In Siberia, there is a shortage of labor. Indian labor is known to be efficient and hence could play an important part in the development of Siberia.

The question is how to ensure the smooth functioning of this corridor when the North-South Corridor is operating below capacity. One option could be to have sub-regional cooperation among Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, and India. If sub-regional cooperation takes off, many of the problems related to the transport corridor could be sorted out. A joint coordination committee could be set up comprising of members belonging to the four countries. The committee could oversee and address problems such as the harmonization of trans-shipment rules, custom duties, tariffs, etc., and ensure the smooth functioning of the corridor in the interests of all concerned. The physical infrastructure and development that would occur in the process could act as a tool for development and strengthen cooperation.

Bilateral Context

While regional input has played an important role in Indo-Russian relations, the bilateral context is equally substantial. At the political level, both India and Russia have steadfastly supported each other on issues of crucial importance. Russia's position on the Kashmir issue is very close to India's position. Taking note of President Pervez Musharraf's speech of January 12, 2002, a joint statement issued at the end of Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's visit to India (February 3–4, 2002) said, "Pakistan's commitment can only be judged by the concrete action Pakistan takes on ground."¹⁶ In other words, Russia showed complete understanding of India's position on cross-border terrorism and its reluctance to engage in a dialogue with Pakistan at that time, while on the Chechen issue, India expressed support for the steps taken by Russia to protect its territorial integrity and constitutional order in the rebellious Chechen Republic.¹⁷ On the question of terrorism and the need to initiate countermeasures, India and Russia had similar views. At an international forum, India and Russia have vigorously championed the need to combat this menace with a greater sense of urgency. The two countries have often reiterated their

¹⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report, 2001–2002*, 53.

¹⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 53.

deep commitment to fighting religious extremism and terrorism. Several institutional linkages have been established to facilitate exchange and sharing of information and advancing the common interests in the best possible way.

The congruence of views between India and Russia had a favorable impact on defense cooperation. This cooperation was put on a firm footing with the landmark Sukhoi deal signed in late 1996. The salutary features of Indo-Russian defense cooperation were its long-term-basis transfer of technology, modernization of existing equipment, and access to the latest equipment, weaponry, etc. in the Russian arsenal. In fact, defense cooperation had gone beyond the main “buyer-seller” syndrome and had moved to the plane of joint design, research, and production. Recently, the chief of the Indian Armed Forces was in Russia to assure the Russians that enhanced interaction with the United States would not lead to a drift towards that country on the question of defense cooperation.

Even on the nuclear issue, Russia showed considerable understanding of the Indian position when the Pokhran-II blasts took place in 1998. Initially, there was disquiet in Russia over the blasts, but later, Russia did not go public in criticizing India. Importantly, it did not impose sanctions. In fact, in June 1998, an agreement for the construction of two 1000-MW reactors at Kundankulam was signed during the visit of the Russian minister for atomic energy, Evgenii Adamov.

Conclusion

It can be said with some degree of certainty that Indo-Russian ties will not witness any drastic fluctuations. As long as core interests continue to coincide, such a possibility is ruled out. Moreover, there is no direct clash of interests to anticipate such an eventuality. The above-mentioned new areas of cooperation would further strengthen the relationship. Above all, however, political will is required.