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India, Russia, China Strengthen Ties, Challenging US Vision for South and Central Asia

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The visit of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to New Delhi last week turned out to be an occasion for the Indian government to fundamentally reassess the strategic significance of the traditional India-Russia partnership. No doubt, the visit took place at a turning point in contemporary history and politics against the backdrop of massive shifts in the international system.

Medvedev arrived in India in the immediate aftermath of the horrific terrorist strikes on Mumbai. The regional security situation - especially Afghanistan - naturally figured prominently in the agenda of the visit.

The joint declaration signed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Medvedev after extensive talks in New Delhi reflects that the two sides have taken serious pains to understand each other's vital concerns and have endeavored to go more than half the distance to accommodate them. They also made a conscious effort to expand their common ground in the international system. After a considerable lapse of time, Russian-Indian relationship seems to be on the move.

Medvedev and Singh on December 5, 2008 prior to signing nuclear agreement

Things which were hanging fire in the general drift of Russian-India relations in recent years are being attended to. Principal among them is the tendentious issue of the escalation of costs for the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov, which India has contracted to buy. On the eve of Medvedev's visit, the Indian cabinet took the decision to agree to discuss an additional US$2.2 billion payment as demanded by Russia. The government also has approved the acquisition of 80 medium-lift Mi-17 helicopters from Russia worth $1.3 billion.

Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier

Reaching out

Medvedev also came with a brief to discuss the leasing of a nuclear submarine to the Indian navy. India-Russia military cooperation is back in full swing with a host of projects in the pipeline. Russia has consolidated its place as the number one arms supplier for India. But the icing on the cake is the proposed cooperation in the nuclear and space fields. Agreements were signed on Russia constructing four new nuclear power plants in India and on assisting a manned Indian space flight. Russia has offered a new power plant AES-2006, which incorporates a third generation WER-1200 reactor of 1170MW. Russia has also agreed to supply uranium worth $700 million to meet India's acute shortage.

Manmohan described the agreements as signifying a "new milestone in the history of cooperation with Russia". He added, "It is a relationship that has withstood the test of time." He acknowledged that India's dialogue with Russia has "intensified considerably". Significantly, he said the terrorist attacks on Mumbai "present a threat to pluralistic societies" [read Russia] and that "there is much Russia and India can do to promote global peace".

Clearly, the two countries have rediscovered the old élan of their friendship. They are reaching out to each other once again in a world that is in transition. Apart from the volatility in the international situation, both India and Russia sense that change is in the air in the United States' global policies, but neither would wager the extent and directions of the change. Both are acutely conscious of the inexorable decline in the US influence in world politics and the urgent need to adjust to the emergent realities of multipolarity.

At the same time, the US remains the single-most important interlocutor for both India and Russia for the foreseeable future. Neither would see their partnership as directed against the US. Even as Medvedev arrived in Delhi, a senior Indian official was making contacts with key advisors to president-elect Barack Obama to brief them on Delhi's perspectives and policies. On its part, Moscow is also in an expectant mood about the Obama presidency, though tempered with cautious optimism.

The balancing of Russian-Indian mutual interests evident in the joint declaration brings out these delicate impulses as they touch on many areas. The declaration is devoid of any anti-US rhetoric as such but it is very obvious that the two countries are overhauling their

partnership in tune with a "post-American century". India has identified itself with the Russian position on reforming the international economic and financial systems so that it adapts to "new realities" and promotes a "more just world economic order based on the principles of multipolarity, rule of law, equality, mutual respect and common responsibility".

Russia seeks Sino-Indian rapport

India also finds itself emphasizing the "growing and more focused interaction" within the framework of the trilateral format among Russia, China and India, despite its lukewarm attitude in the recent past towards the process which annoys Washington as a needless endeavor on India's part.

Significantly, the joint declaration says that the trilateral format "acquires importance in the framework of multilateral dialogue mechanisms, substantially contributes to strengthening newly emerging multipolarity and promotes collective leadership of world's leading states". This is a carefully drafted formulation that speaks of an intention to inject new dynamism into the format. Conceivably, Moscow has prevailed on Delhi to reassess the significance of the format in the volatile international situation. Russia had been viewing with growing despondency its inability to foster Sino-Indian rapport.

Equally, the Russian side seems to have urged India to play a more active role and "more constructive participation and contribution to" the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Similarly, India has shed its carefully cultivated ambivalence and come out in open, unqualified support of the Russian position on the situation in the Caucasus region. It is a signal victory of the Kremlin to have finally got India on board, as this is a most sensitive issue which occupies the first circle of Russian foreign policy and is, in fact, a leitmotif of Russia's relations with the US in the coming period. The joint declaration stresses, "India supports the important role of the Russian Federation in promoting peace and cooperation in the Caucasian region".

The key expression is "Caucasian" - anything from the Caucasus region. India's support is open-ended and unequivocal.

Again, India has voiced its support for Russia's keenness to join the Asia-Europe meeting and East Asia summit mechanisms, while Russia has reiterated its support for India's claim to permanent membership in an expanded United Nations Security Council.

From the Indian perspective, no doubt, it is an invaluable asset that Moscow has voiced its total "support and solidarity" with New Delhi on the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The Russian gesture by far exceeds the words of sympathy offered by Washington. Of course, Moscow is not facing Washington's dilemma, which is one of having to carefully balance between New Delhi and Islamabad. Simply put, what the Mumbai attacks have badly exposed is that much as terrorism is a shared concern for the US and India, their priorities at this juncture greatly differ.

India would expect Washington to come down like a ton of bricks on Islamabad to pressure the latter to take seriously the Indian allegation that the terrorist strike in Mumbai was perpetrated by elements in Pakistan with possible links to that country's security establishment. Evidently, Washington is in no position to fulfill the Indian expectations. Its number one priority is the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's continued cooperation in the war. Washington cannot afford a "distracted" Pakistan, and its main political and diplomatic

challenge, therefore, is to get Pakistan to remain "focused" on the war effort in the Afghan-Pakistan tribal areas.

New Delhi senses that as time goes by, it will find this paradigm frustrating. This is not a new paradigm, either. But Delhi's options are limited, though the government is under immense pressure not only to act but also to be seen actively acting. The delicate strategic balance between India and Pakistan virtually forecloses even a "limited" war option for either nuclear power. The only alternative open to India is to reassess its diplomatic options. But on this score, New Delhi needs to do some new thinking.

Which is where Delhi's partnership with Moscow comes into play. The strategic community in New Delhi would realize to their great discomfit that the entire package of post-Cold War assumptions underlying the US-India strategic partnership just do not add up in the present situation for India to cope with the formidable task of pressuring Pakistan. Their broad assumption that the US would take care of India's "Pakistan problem" while India concentrated on its tryst with destiny as a great power or "balancer" in the international system is turning out to be a grotesque misjudgment by the Indian strategic gurus. So, indeed, their assumptions regarding "absolute security".

The Russian-Indian joint declaration suggests that New Delhi is swiftly adapting to the reality that it must diversify the sinews of cooperation and revitalize its diverse partnerships with countries on the basis of shared concerns and commonality of interests rather than pursue a foreign policy whose prime objective has been to harmonize Indian regional policies with the US's. This is most tellingly evident on the Joint Declaration's paragraph devoted to Afghanistan.

Realignment on Afghanistan

Ironically, New Delhi seems to have decided that if it is Afghan war that causes so much discomfiture for Washington to come out into the open in support of India over the Mumbai strikes, it shall also be Afghanistan on which Indian regional policy shall begin to make a new beginning and careen away for the first time in a long while from US benchmarks and expectations.

The punch line in the joint declaration comes almost innocuously. Sharing their concern over the "deteriorating security situation" in Afghanistan, India and Russia called for a "coherent and a united international commitment" to dealing with the threats emanating from that country. The implied criticism of the US-led war is obvious as also the rejection of the US strategy to keep the war strategy as its exclusive prerogative. The Joint Declaration then goes on to say, "Both sides welcome Russia's initiative to organize an international conference in the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, involving its Member states and Observers."

New Delhi has come out into open support of a regional initiative on Afghanistan, which Washington would have loved to stifle in its cradle. The Indian stance is significant for various reasons. India has decided that there is no need to mark time until the Obama administration finalizes its own new Afghan strategy. It is asserting its own stakes independent of the US strategy. Two, India is identifying with Russia, China and Iran, which is an immensely significant happening in regional politics. Three, India is siding with a Russia-led regional initiative on Afghanistan at a time when various influential American opinion-makers have been floating the idea of a US-led "regional approach" to an Afghan settlement that virtually

allows the US to be on the driving seat.

Most certainly, India is implicitly recognizing the SCO's relevance to South Asian security. Afghanistan is a member of the SAARC and could act as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia. In essence, therefore, India is spurning the US's much-touted "Great Central Asia" strategy that aims at diluting the SCO's role in Central Asia and instead pins hopes on India as a counterweight to the Russian and Chinese regional influence.

Indian Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Murli Deora (front) at the sixth summit of the SCO in Shanghai, June 15, 2006. Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran are observer countries.

It is apparent that India is dissociating from the concerted US policy to keep the SCO out of Afghanistan. Moscow has been vainly striving to carve out a toehold for the SCO as a regional body while Washington has been discouraging Afghan President Hamid Karzai from lending weight to the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. More than anything else, the fact remains that the Russian initiative on an SCO conference is intended as a challenge to the monopoly that Washington has kept in determining the contours of any Afghan settlement.

Indeed, it opens up more possibilities for Karzai to expand his "strategic autonomy" vis-a-vis Washington, which he has been inclined to exercise, even if timidly, of late. Karzai has every reason to cooperate with a regional initiative in which all the major powers surrounding Afghanistan such as Russia, China, India and Iran are associated. The onus is now on the US and Pakistan to explain why they should dissociate.

Of course, the US would have preferred to encourage the on-going Turkish initiative to mediate Afghan-Pakistan talks. The latest three-way round involving the presidents of Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan just concluded in Ankara. Washington was happy that Turkey lent a hand in keeping the Afghan peace process as an "in-house" affair - keeping "outsiders" like Russia or Iran at arm's length. The SCO initiative is a needless intrusion, from the US-Turkish perspective.

SCO stance on Afghanistan

A most significant aspect of the Russian-Indian Joint Declaration is its deafening silence on the US-sponsored talks with the Taliban. The Russian and Indian position is that there is nothing called "moderate" Taliban leaders, whereas, the US is edging close to a formula that so long as the Taliban leadership disengages and disowns al-Qaeda, there should be no problem in assimilating them as part of a coalition government in Kabul. In fact, the second round of talks with the Taliban under Saudi mediation is due to take place shortly.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai arriving in Shanghai. Karzai was a guest at the 2006 SCO Conference.

In the context of the Mumbai blasts, the Indian attitude towards the Taliban can only harden further, placing itself at odds with the US strategy in the coming period. In a manner of speaking, the Russian-Iranian-Indian convergence in bolstering the anti-Taliban resistance in the late 1990s is straining to reappear, though in an entirely new form. Interestingly, Iranian officials also held consultations recently in New Delhi regarding Afghanistan.

Without doubt, India would have given thought to the SCO's collective stance on the Afghan problem prior to lending support for the regional body's initiative to call an international conference. The Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin's speech at the UN General Assembly session in New York on November 10 on behalf of the SCO becomes the benchmark for New Delhi. Evidently, Delhi finds itself in harmony with the major elements in Churkin's speech. The key elements were:

•"Concerted joint action" by the international community is necessary to arrest the "continuing deterioration of the military and political situation" in Afghanistan.

The policy of isolating the extremist Taliban leaders should not be watered down and any reconciliation should only include those Taliban cadres who are "rank-and-file Taliban members who are not tainted by military crimes".

•A system of "anti-drug and financial security belts" should be set up around Afghanistan with the coordinating role of the UN and involvement of neighboring countries.

•NATO must cease operations involving "indiscriminate or excessive use of force, including bombings" that cause heavy civilian casualties. The level of collateral damage in the military operations is hampering Afghanistan's long-term stabilization.

•An enduring Afghan settlement is "impossible without an integrated approach on the part of the international community, led by the United Nations, and at the same time without delegating to Kabul greater independence in resolving inter-Afghan problems".

•"The situation in Afghanistan cannot be fixed by solely military means". Therefore, security must be backed by "real measures" towards socio-economic revival.

•"It is essential to ensure respectful attitudes towards national and religious values, centuries-long customs and traditions of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious people of Afghanistan and on these grounds to achieve conciliation of Afghanistan’s antagonistic forces".

In sum, the Mumbai attacks may prove to be a watershed in Indian regional policies.

Relations with Russia, China and Iran assume a new level of importance in New Delhi's regional strategies. The gravitation towards the SCO signifies the new thinking. Not too long ago, India visualized the SCO as primarily an "energy club". Actually, India's petroleum minister routinely represented India at the SCO summit meetings. Now, to envisage a crucial role for an SCO-led regional initiative on Afghanistan, New Delhi has indeed come a long way. Surely, Medvedev would have returned to Moscow quietly pleased that he met a long-lost friend.

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