

Sept. 11 Fallout? Russia, India Revive 'Trilateral Cooperation' With China

by Ramtanu Maitra

The back-to-back India visits of Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (Feb. 3) and Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov (Feb. 5-7), are expected to draw attention of the important capitals of the world. Foreign Minister Ivanov, who stopped at Delhi on his way to Kabul from Tokyo, revived the concept of "trilateral cooperation" among Russia, India and China.

The concept of a triangular relationship was first proposed by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who, during his visit to Delhi in 1999, expressed hope that India, China, and Russia would be able to establish a "strategic triangle" that would be in the interests of peace and security. "India," Primakov said on that occasion, "is a great power, and a lot depends on the policy pursued by India, Russia and China."

The Revived Concept

The issue of such Russia-India-China cooperation figured in an hour-long discussion Feb. 3 between the visiting Russian Foreign Minister and the Indian Defense Minister, George Fernandes. According to the Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson, Mrs. Nirupama Rao, both "agreed that the three countries can explore means of strengthening cooperation slowly and steadily." Formal announcement by both sides indicates that the cooperation will be initially to counter international terrorism, and also to provide energy security.

What "energy security" means over a long period of time has not been spelled out yet. But what it means in the immediate context, to India, is the Russian and Chinese agreement to finance and participate as guarantors for the \$5.6 billion proposed Iran-India gas pipeline, via the Pakistan overland route. The project has been discussed for years, but India found it difficult to endorse the proposed route because of its hostile relationship with Pakistan.

In addition, India has been invited to participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer in its next meeting at St. Petersburg in June. The SCO is an important security forum with China, Russia, and four Central Asian nations—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—as its members. Pakistan, which, like India, is keen to get into the forum, has made a formal application.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Klebanov's three-day visit will be more of a bilateral forum between India and Russia. He will co-chair, with the Indian Finance Minister

Yashwant Sinha, the annual Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) meeting on cooperation in various fields, including trade. Klebanov, who is also the co-chairman of the IRIGC on military-technical cooperation, with Defense Minister George Fernandes, discussed a whole range of issues with Fernandes relating to defense cooperation and supplies, the Indian officials reported.

Following his meeting with the Indian Defense Minister, Klebanov said: "I have brought proposals for joint ventures, with equal financial stakes, in research, development, and production of high-tech weapons." Though emphasizing that India and Russia should move beyond arms sales, he said the time has come for the two countries to join hands in developing futuristic weapons, especially for the air force and navy. Citing the recent success in testing the jointly developed Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles, Klebanov said India and Russia should venture into development and production of fifth generation fighters as well as civilian aircraft.

During subsequent meetings with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, and National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, Klebanov reported that he visualizes joint ventures in civil and military fields as part of a strategic partnership.

The Earlier Concept

In 1999, when the concept of a "strategic triangle" was first mooted in Delhi by the Russian Prime Minister, Moscow was deeply concerned about expansion of NATO. What was in Moscow's mind, as Presidential spokesman Sergei Prikhodko explained, was to develop a counterbalance to the aggressive unilateral expansion of NATO, as exhibited by Washington in its Yugoslavia campaign.

Not exhibiting such fear any longer, both Moscow and New Delhi seem to be approaching this important move in a more effective and mature fashion. Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov said there were no plans for India, Russia, and China to forge any axis or bloc. The three countries were "self-sufficient" and were interested in expanding their relations in the post-Cold War era, Ivanov said, adding "we have a common field for interaction, many common interests and common approaches on the world order."

Ivanov went further, in order to assuage "fears" of those who oppose any triangular cooperation, saying that Russia

The Summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization



The other war against terrorism: New “strategic triangle” cooperation among China, Russia, and India may bring India into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, formed in 1996 to coordinate against separatist terrorism. Pakistan, as well, wishes to join. The triangular cooperation China-Russia-India has economic objectives also, but is partly a reaction to U.S. “Sept. 11” policies.

considers Japan also an important ingredient in this cooperation. According to Itar-TASS, he named India, China, and Japan as Russia’s main partners in Asia with which Moscow will develop and strengthen strategic interaction to revive a multipolar world. “Russia has special interest in developing relations with India, as well as with Japan,” Ivanov said.

The revival of the intent to develop trilateral cooperation between two Asian giants and the only “Eurasian nation,” after two years of near-silence, could not have been more timely. The Indian External Affairs Ministry sources, however, pointed out that the subject remained under discussion all this while at the unofficial level among academics and think-tanks in these three countries. It was also “touched upon” during Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji’s trip to India in January. At that time an Indian think-tank, the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), had held a two-day seminar at New Delhi on the subject.

EIR, on the other hand, had been promoting the concept of triangular cooperation among India, China, and Russia, long before Primakov had made public his intent in 1999.

Beijing, which had expressed its disinclination to the idea

when Prime Minister Primakov proposed it, seems to be more agreeable to the concept now. During his recent visit to India, Zhu Rongji, beside urging New Delhi to enhance Sino-Indian trade, commerce, business, and science and technology cooperation at a rapid pace, said at the banquet speech hosted in his honor by the Indian Prime Minister: “Currently, the international situation is undergoing complex and profound changes. As the two largest developing countries in the world, China and India have on their shoulders important responsibilities for maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in Asia.” The statement is extraordinary since China, for the first time, acknowledged that India has a role to play in all of Asia, and not merely in South Asia.

Even before Prime Minister Zhu’s visit, China-India relations had begun showing a sign of life. In April 2001, New Delhi supported Beijing in beating back a Washington-sponsored full-court press to pass a resolution condemning alleged human rights abuses in China. After the vote at the 53-member UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan had personally thanked his Indian counterpart, Jaswant Singh, for the support extended by him.

Since then, indications of Chinese reciprocity became more evident than ever before in recent years.

But beyond that, a number of other factors have come into play. The Indian news daily *The Hindu* pointed out in its editorial on Feb. 4 that it has become obvious to New Delhi, that Moscow is eager to upgrade its India-centric strategic partnership to meet the diplomatic challenges of the “Bush doctrine.” What that doctrine means to do, *The Hindu* said, is to co-opt both India and Russia, besides China, into a larger campaign “to create peace and prosperity in a global order beyond his ongoing war of terror.” However, America’s assertive unilateralism, as expressed in President Bush’s State of the Union speech, could not be acceptable to either Russia, China, or India. The nations belonging to Bush’s alleged “axis of evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) are located in the extended neighborhood of these three large nations. *The Hindu* asserted that the statement also poses somewhat of a threat to these three.

Strategic Considerations

For all the strategic marginalization of Russia and China, there is also an increasing sense of disquiet in these two countries about a larger U.S. military role in Asia. At the Wehrkunde international security conference in Germany (see *International*), the defense and foreign ministers of Germany, Russia, and China expressed themselves against any arbitrary expansion of the United States-led anti-terrorism fight. All three emphasized that future anti-terrorism strikes against any nation must have a UN mandate. They were responding to U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz’s assertion that the United States did not need a UN mandate, and could go it alone.

New Delhi has become uneasy over these developments. Despite the fact that India and the United States have revived their military-to-military interaction, signalling the end of the tension caused by India’s Pokhran II test of nuclear devices in May 1998, New Delhi is worried that President Bush is now scaling up his anti-terror manifesto by injecting into it his long-term foreign policy objectives. By setting up bases in Pakistan and some Central Asian nations, which have all been identified as “frontline states” by the United States in its fight against terrorism in Afghanistan, Washington has raised concern in both India and Russia at the official level.

Beijing is also wary of America’s growing strategic presence in its environment. According to the government officials in New Delhi, India and Russia, which have “excellent relations,” marked by similarity of views on most international issues, discussed in depth during Ivanov’s and Klebanov’s visits a common stand on Afghanistan, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, and India-Pakistan relations.

On Feb. 5, the head of the Indian Air Force, Satish Jain, had met Tajik Defense Minister Sherali Khairullayev in Dushanbe and offered technical assistance to upgrade the Aini military airfield near the Tajik capital. Earlier, the

French had agreed to do the upgrading, but later declined. Tajikistan is considered to be most dependent on Russia among all Central Asian nations. New Delhi has taken note of the Russian intelligence agency’s report that a possible deployment of anti-missile systems at the U.S. base in Khanabad in Uzbekistan, may affect Russian strategic facilities throughout vast areas.

In addition, New Delhi had been skeptical about Washington’s commitment against terrorism. It has been pointed out repeatedly in New Delhi that Washington is keen to deal with those who cause harm to the United States, and its citizens, but the United States does not find the same zeal to tackle those who commit terrorism against others.

Energy Security

The triangular cooperation, as Foreign Minister Ivanov pointed out, will be to ensure “energy security” to the subcontinent. China has shown interest in connecting a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to its western Xinjiang province, for onward supply to Pakistan and India. Iran’s petroleum minister will be visiting Pakistan in March and it is likely that the Iran-India gas pipeline via the Pakistan overland route will be a major subject of discussion during his visit.

At the same time, the United States is not waiting and watching. This month, a high-level U.S. Export-Import Bank, Trade and Development Agency (TDA), and Overseas Private Insurance Corporation (OPIC) combined delegation will arrive in Islamabad to explore business opportunities, including oil and gas pipeline investment. It has also been reported that Deputy Treasury Secretary Kenneth Dam, who was in Islamabad the last week in January, is also going to New Delhi to discuss trade and investment, and again to demand that India make contract payments to Enron.

Meanwhile, China has held talks with Pakistan’s petroleum minister in connection with the White Oil Pipeline project, a Pakistani project with Chinese involvement in construction and financing. China’s Exim bank has allocated a \$120 million credit for the project, which will run from Port Qasim, near Karachi, to the country’s north, and meet 75% of Pakistan’s oil transportation needs. The construction contract has been awarded to China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Company, and work may begin this June.

China, Russia, and India are all making diplomatic moves in Afghanistan—Ivanov’s one-day trip to Kabul on Feb. 4 from Delhi, China’s opening of its embassy in Kabul on Feb. 6, and the arrival of a high-powered Indian trade delegation in Kabul on Feb. 7. These moves are neither uncoordinated nor unrelated events. A wider Indian participation in Kabul was urged by Ivanov during his short visit to Delhi. It is expected also that in the coming days, China will begin making forays on the trade and commerce front in Afghanistan. China, unlike India, never had a base within Afghanistan, and that could be a reason why Beijing’s efforts will be slower, but it will be there.