
India-Russia

Summit Builds 'Strategic Triangle' Potential

by Mary Burdman

India and Russia enjoyed decades of very close political and economic ties during the last half-century. The Nov. 11-13 summit of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow showed the two governments committed to transforming their relationship to deal with a crisis-ridden world. War and terrorism are grave threats to the stability of these two nations' "common neighborhood"—a vast region which includes Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Chechnya. In their joint Declaration on "Global Challenges and Threats to World Security and Stability" of Nov. 12, they opposed "any type of extremist ideology and intolerance," and pledged that they will "resist with their full might all forms of extremism."

The statement certainly aims at the religious and other extremists who generated such havoc in Afghanistan and other nations of Central and West Asia. But it could also apply to ideologies growing in other, very different, nations, which also threaten world peace.

In New Delhi on the eve of Vajpayee's departure, Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal had forecast the strategic context of the summit: "Russia especially is focussing a great deal on global challenges and threats to world security and stability. . . . We intend to issue a declaration on this."

The Declaration made the important primary assertion that the United Nations has to be the forum for dealing with global security issues; Russia and India are "Determined to cooperate in countering global challenges and threats, which emanate from international terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." But they also demand a "consistent and uncompromising approach to terrorism," and the abandonment of "double standards" in defining terrorism and dealing with it. Connecting this to a realistic assessment of how terrorism operates, the Declaration also expresses determination to counter the grave threat posed by ever-expanding illegal drug trafficking, "narcobusiness," and illegal arms trafficking, as key sources of financial and logistical support to international terrorist operations.

In their Declaration, and, much more extensively in the two leaders' "India-Russia Joint Statement" of Nov. 13, Putin and Vajpayee affirmed that they are "convinced that their strategic partnership has served as a factor in global peace and security." India and Russia will cooperate, bilaterally and

multilaterally, "towards the establishment of a multipolar and just world order based on sovereign equality of all States, their territorial integrity and non-interference in their internal affairs. Threats to global security and strategic stability should be dealt with taking into account the legitimate security considerations of all States."

They also propose a dialogue of civilizations: "India and the Russian Federation are convinced that greater interaction and mutual respect among diverse societies and cultures will lead both to enrichment of these cultures as well as to enhanced harmony and security in the world. . . . There is no place . . . for any type of extremist ideology and intolerance."

Both nations have internal as well as international reasons for this strategic approach. They are "two large and influential democracies," multi-national and multi-cultural, with many languages, religions, and peoples in one large nation. The Indian Prime Minister told *Rossiskaya Gazeta* that at the time of its independence, many had thought that India, with all its peoples, religions, and languages, and burdened by poverty, could not survive as a democratic nation for long. "We have proved the skeptics wrong," he said. "The magnitude of this achievement is sometimes not fully appreciated." This lesson from history shapes Indian—and Russian—policymaking today.

Of the four international "crisis spots" discussed by Putin and Vajpayee, the first, discussed in greatest detail, was the urgent need to stabilize Afghanistan, where extremism and drug production are both rising dangerously. They also called for the "earliest restoration of Iraq's sovereignty"; for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and supported the Six-Power Talks to peacefully settle the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. They offered each other mutual support in dealing with separatism and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, and in Chechnya; and Moscow supported India's initiatives, in April and October, to break the deadlock in its relations with Pakistan.

Economic, Energy Ties Key

The friendly atmosphere of the Vajpayee's Moscow visit began with a quiet, private dinner with Putin at his dacha, and they held formal talks the next day. Since 2000, when their Declaration on Strategic Partnership was signed, the two nations have held regular annual summits. The growth of relations is shown by the President and Prime Minister's four meetings in the past 12 months: Putin visited India in December 2002, completing his remarkable "triangle diplomacy" from Moscow to Beijing and then directly to New Delhi; Vajpayee was an honored guest at the 300-year celebrations in St. Petersburg in May; they held meetings in France at the G-8 summit in June, and at the UN General Assembly in September. At this summit, Putin accepted an invitation to visit India again, and Vajpayee also met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Boris Alyoshin, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. The latter was invited



Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee (left) and Russian President Putin signed a “Declaration on Global Challenges and Threats to World Security and Stability” at the Kremlin on Nov. 13. Vajpayee’s visit centered also on energy and economic cooperation, and was seen as opportune for Putin’s domestic showdown with Russia’s “oligarchs.”

to India immediately to return the visit last January of Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes.

The two leaders signed 10 economic and other agreements, including a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space for Peaceful Purposes. Most important was that Vajpayee brought with him almost 100 leading Indian industrialists and businessmen, and addressed a Joint Meeting of Indian and Russian businessmen on Nov. 13, which he called a “landmark event” in their commercial relations. The Joint Statement after the talks said the two leaders want to “devise a long-term strategic approach taking into account the mutually complementary strengths of the two countries, the changes anticipated in the nature of bilateral economic ties, and the emerging trends at the global level. . . . They must explore each other’s existing potential and emerging capabilities.”

As Indian analysts point out, this big economic delegation was particularly important amidst President Putin’s conflicts with the Russian financial oligarchy and its international supporters. “Russia can now say, ‘We have friends all over the world’ who want to work with us economically. The oligarchy has been told that they must behave. There was a lot of discussion of expansion of trade, and joint investment in strategic areas, including in oil,” one analyst told *EIR*.

Vajpayee emphasized complementarity of the two economies: India’s large market, excellent human resources, and favorable demographics; Russia’s enormous natural resources, “as well as acknowledged scientific and technological excellence.” Even “during a period of major economic slowdown around most of the globe, India and Russia have continued to grow,” he said, and have “both achieved expertise and even dominance in certain areas of technology.”

In many of India’s technological and scientific achievements—in founding its heavy industry, in space, in nuclear

energy—there has been a “strong Russian connection,” which Vajpayee said must be invigorated. Trade between them has in fact fallen to an annual level of less than \$1.5 billion, from \$3.5 billion annually in Soviet days; now the two sides are ending their special, Soviet-era “rupee-ruble” trade agreements, and switching to “hard currency” trade. Some \$2.7 billion worth of rupee debt under this arrangement is still to be settled, and Vajpayee said that a task force is being set up to use these funds “for investment in both countries.” Putin had proposed this in New Delhi last December.

Nuclear Cooperation

“We are focussing on diversification from the traditional items of trade to high-tech areas of cooperation, including joint design and development of equipment, information technology and bio-technology,” Vajpayee said. Better banking arrangements are also being made to expand trade.

Strategic areas of cooperation are the well-established military ties, and energy. Russia is a big energy exporter, and India an ever-larger importer. Russia is helping India build a light-water nuclear power plant at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu, and India is investing in the oil field at Sakhalin 1.

The whole field of peaceful uses of nuclear energy has great potential. On Nov. 3, Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev, on the eve of a visit to the United States, told *The Hindu* that he is pushing to have the international bans on nuclear deals with India lifted. “I always raise the problem of India whenever I meet my colleagues from other countries,” he said. “There is a pressing need to review the guidelines of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and work out a special arrangement for India to allow it to cooperate with other countries in the nuclear field.” India had developed its nuclear weapons technologies indigenously, Rumyantsev said, rather than receiving them from a third country,

and has a flawless record on nuclear non-proliferation. It has no alternative to nuclear power to meet its growing energy needs.

The Russian Ministry repeated this call on Nov. 11, after discussions with Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. "It is high time to review bans on nuclear co-operation with India imposed in 1992 by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)," the Ministry announced. Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal had just told reporters in New Delhi that India is interested in buying more nuclear energy reactors from Russia.

Military cooperation is now at the advanced level of joint research, development, and training, and military exchanges. As Vajpayee said in an interview with *Trud* published on Nov. 11, joint military cooperation has "outgrown the framework of 'buyer and seller' relations. Interaction between India and Russia has reached the level of joint design of projects and creation of prototype models and production." This includes advanced military airplanes, missiles, frigates, and tanks. Future sales of jointly produced military equipment to third countries are now on the agenda.

Building a Eurasian Land-Bridge

Russia and India are also actively building the Eurasian Land-Bridge. At the center of this is the "North-South Transport Corridor" from India's Indian Ocean ports via those of Iran, through Central Asia, across the Caspian Sea, to Russia. This was launched in 2000, at first, as a group of trade agreements to make it easier to ship goods on existing infrastructure. Now, badly needed new infrastructure is being built. India is already shipping to Russia through the Corridor, and Vajpayee encouraged Russian exporters to use it much more.

This year, Russia has built several large container terminals at the Russian Caspian seaports of Olya, near the large port of Astrakhan, and Makhackala. By 2005, Russia will complete construction of a 50-kilometer railway to link Olya with Russia's national rail network. The government has cut port tariffs by 45% to encourage use of the new terminals. Just before Vajpayee's visit, Russian Deputy Transportation Minister Chinghiz Izmailov told *The Hindu* that "it would obviously make sense if Indian and Russian companies give thought to establishing an international consortium for container shipment along the North-South Transport Corridor."

Of perhaps greater historic importance, discussion of building the first-ever railroad into Afghanistan, with cooperation of India, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, is also on the agenda. This matter was to be discussed at the Moscow summit as of strategic importance. In Tashkent on Nov. 8, Indian External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha announced that India would participate in building trans-Afghanistan roads between Termez, Uzbekistan, and the Iranian port of Chah Bahar on the Sea of Oman. "We have decided to add a rail link too," he said.

The Strategic Triangle

The Russian-Indian discussions were rounded with the idea of the "Strategic Triangle" of Russia, China and India. Vajpayee, who has played a key role in making Indian relations with China much warmer, discussed the "Triangle" in an interview with *Rossiskaya Gazeta*. "There are several issues on which the three countries share views and can consult each other," Vajpayee said. "The creation of a just, multipolar world order is one such issue. There are a large number of areas of potential in economic cooperation among the three countries."

Relations between India and China have long been the weak link among the three. Now, Vajpayee said, "relations with China have been improving steadily over the years," with many high-level visits, bilateral interaction, and substantially better economic ties. "During my visit to China in June, we agreed to raise our bilateral political and economic cooperation to qualitatively higher levels," Vajpayee said. "As our relationship expands and diversifies, it will increase mutual goodwill and trust, which should facilitate resolution of our differences between us," including the still-unresolved border. "We will proceed along this course, in the conviction that as we intensify and diversify our economic cooperation and people-to-people links, we can develop a climate of understanding and trust in which differences can be resolved from a larger political perspective."

Two recent events show how this larger perspective is being created. On Nov. 14, the Indian and Chinese navies conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise off Shanghai, hailed by both sides as a "complete success." This was a "search and rescue exercise" aimed at securing maritime trade. The exercise had been proposed during Vajpayee's June visit to China.

Of even greater interest, India and Nepal have agreed to build their first-ever railroad link. Nepal, a landlocked nation in the Himalayas, and India have signed an agreement to open a rail link from Raxaul in India, over the border to Birgunj in Nepal. India has built a 5.4 kilometer-long railway line, and Nepal is building rail infrastructure in the town of Birgunj. This is particularly important in the greater picture, because China is steadily constructing the first-ever railroad into Tibet. When that is completed, and more rail links are built from the Indian and Nepalese side, the two most populous nations in the world can be linked to each other in the southern tier of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

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