

Putin Welcomes India Into Central Asia

by Ramtanu Maitra

Russian President Vladimir Putin's Dec. 3-5 visit to India is remarkable from a number of aspects. This is his second visit to India in two years, and he arrived in New Delhi from Beijing, following a highly successful visit to China. Beside the usual defense and military matters on which the Russians and Indians are in sync, this time around Putin was discussing matters highly strategic and which may have a long-term impact in the region. The discussions not only centered on the fact that the United States has appeared once again in the region with an aggressive posture, but it also took into account the vulnerability of the American power—economic and military—and the rise of China and India as future powers to reckon with.

President Putin had begun this three-nation—China, India, and Kyrgyzstan—trip on Dec. 1 on a strong note. He told the Indian news daily *The Hindu* in an interview, that he is afraid that Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of "bandits and terrorists." "We take note of the statements made by the Pakistani President Pervez Musharrarf that the military potential of his country is safely protected, strictly under control. But, to be frank, our concerns, our anxiety, still persist," said Putin, who made it clear that he shares India's concerns.

In addition, just days before Putin set foot in China, Russia deployed military aircraft to Kant, Kyrgyzstan, with the aim of establishing an air base in the Central Asian nation. Military officials from both countries say the base is designed to enable Russian jets to provide close air support for ground units of Collective Security Treaty member-states against potential security threats. Regional analysts have characterized the development as a strategic setback for the United States. A source at the Russian Defense Ministry said the unit is designed to counter "the emergence of a real security threat on the Commonwealth of Independent States' southern border," the RIA-Novosti news agency reported.

In China, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Putin backed the idea of a triangular alliance among Russia, China, and India, while at the same time stating clearly that good relations with Washington, and the war on terrorism, is the centerpiece of Russian ambitions—a sentiment shared by both India and China. None of these nations is anxious to convey to the United States that it is willing even to consider a Moscow-Delhi-Beijing triangle to confront Washington. In 1998, the proposal for a strategic tie among Russia, India, and China was mooted by then-Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni

Primakov, ostensibly to contain the spread of U.S. influence through NATO's eastward thrust and Washington's growing involvement in Central Asia for oil. Putin was clear in his interview with *The Hindu* that there is a future for developing the Russia-China-India triangle. "We are convinced of the need for positive development of relations between Russia and India, Russia and China, and China and India. I think that all parties within this triangle are interested in this development."

Following a serious break in relations between India and China in 1998 when New Delhi tested its nuclear explosives, China has begun engaging India more definitively through high-level bilateral visits. The process has given birth to a Joint Working Group on terrorism, which had its first meeting in April, and movement on the vexatious border negotiations, stalled for nearly a decade. Beijing is also reportedly not opposed to India's entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It was reported that Putin, during his discussions in Beijing, had indicated that the Indian involvement in the SCO would be welcomed by Russia.

Key Issues

India is the only country that has a ten-year agreement with Russia for cooperation in the military sphere. "And of course every visit of such rank—every summit of our leaders—is expected to be some kind of a breakthrough for Russian arms trade and for the Russian arms industry in particular," said a Russian defense analyst. This time there was less ceremony, but India will lease from Russia an Akula-class nuclear submarine, which can carry nuclear-capable Klub-class cruise missiles with a 300-kilometer range. It has also been reported that the deal to refurbish and sell a Russian aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Gorshkov*, to the Indian Navy has been finalized after three years of negotiations. Moscow sees India as a strategic partner and has already sold some of its most sophisticated weaponry to its South Asian ally. Some weapons have even been designed especially for the Indian Army, like the Su-30 planes, which are being upgraded to meet Indian requirements.

The Indians and Russians also showed much interest in cooperation in oil and natural gas exploration—India is short of both. Russia had earlier brought India in on the development of Russia's Sakhalin oil fields, and while in Delhi, Putin indicated that he would like India to participate in the exploration of Caspian basin oil and gas fields. A week later, the Indian Oil Corp. and Russia's Sroytransgraz announced a joint bid for a \$120 million oil pipeline project that will carry 150,000 barrels per day of crude oil through the 300 kilometer stretch between Iraq's border and Jordan's Zarqa refinery.

President Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee discussed two other key issues now under the spotlight: the potential invasion of Iraq by the United States and the war against terrorism. In the New Delhi Declaration that followed Putin's meeting with Vajpayee, India and Russia

endorsed the war against terrorism and strongly condemned those who support terrorism and finance, train, harbor, and support terrorists. What Putin conveyed to both China and India, is that the militant secessionist movements, such as those in Chechnya, Xinjiang, and Kashmir, have to be opposed with equal fervor. While Washington's war against terrorism is focussed against those who are undermining American interests, the United States is less concerned about the secessionist militant movements which often work hand in glove with international terrorists such as al-Qaeda. This clear distinction made by Putin has pleased both Beijing and New Delhi and confirms their belief that Washington is using "double standards" in its war on terrorism.

Concern Over Central Asia

Putin and Vajpayee virtually endorsed the resolution of the U.S.-Iraq conflict through the United Nations. It is apparent that both are agreeable to a U.S. invasion of Iraq if Washington follows the course charted by the UN Security Council. On Central Asia, however, both Moscow and New Delhi, with tacit approval of Beijing, are showing deeper concerns. Convinced that the Afghan situation has spun out of U.S. control, Russia has moved into Kyrgyzstan to set up its military air base. It has also begun to coordinate its policies in the region with India. India has set up an air base at Farkhor in Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan. More important, its recent diplomatic thrust into Central Asia, triggered by the security realignments following the Taliban's ouster, is in keeping with its view of future energy requirements and strategic positioning, and has involved bilateral visits, trade, and military agreements with some of the republics. Though India is unable to overtly influence the "New Game" singlehandedly, its size, military and nuclear capability, and closeness to Russia and good relations with China, make it a not insignificant part of the jigsaw puzzle.

Kazakstan's push for India's membership in the SCO has also drawn attention in Delhi. The Russian and Indian initiatives in Central Asia have caught the attention of the Bush Administration. Just hours after President Putin left for Kyrgyzstan, Prime Minister Vajpayee's principal adviser and foreign policy confidant, Brajesh Mishra, was on his way to Washington, via London. It is evident that Washington is keen to know what transpired between India and Russia, and concerned about some harsh words issued by Pakistan on the Russia-India detente.

Washington has expressed concerns, the most serious of which involves the Indian initiatives in Afghanistan. According to reports, India is heaping largesse on Afghanistan, including giving three Boeing aircraft to Ariana, Afghanistan's national airline, which had been reduced to just one air-worthy craft during the Taliban regime; 50 buses to revive Kabul's public transport system; \$100 million in financial assistance; \$4 million to revive Kabul's Indira Gandhi Hospital, a legacy of the 1960s which, again, has some Indian doctors at

work; \$3 million on upgrading and establishing information technology centers at Kabul's Habibia School; millions of tons of wheat, medicines, and blankets—the list is long. A significant number of Afghans are already training to be doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, while another 250 are training in various other institutions throughout India, including the foreign services and police institutes.

All this gives New Delhi leverage in Kabul. But what also raised the hackles of Pakistan's government is New Delhi's moves to open consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar—two Afghan cities in close proximity to the undemarcated and disputed Durand Line that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan. Islamabad fears that India, with the support of Russia, will promote the old movement to combine the Pashtoons in Afghanistan and Pakistan, reviving "Greater Pashtoonistan" dreams in order to encircle Pakistan. What worries President Musharraf as well, is the fact that India has invited Iran's President Mohammed Seyyed Khatami to be the Chief Guest on India's Republic Day on Jan. 26—Pakistan fears its encirclement by India would then be complete.

On the other hand, there seems to be a tacit agreement emerging between Moscow and New Delhi. Both believe that as and when the United States moves out of Afghanistan, Washington will hand Kabul over to Islamabad, and Islamabad, which still harbors many Taliban and al-Qaeda members, will move to undermine Russian and Indian interests. It is also the reason why Russia and India are preparing to strengthen the non-Pashtoon, anti-Pakistan, and pro-Iran Northern Alliance leaders in Afghanistan militarily. What Moscow and New Delhi do not want, is Islamic militants re-settling in a Pakistan-controlled Afghanistan. New Delhi believes that the Washington-Islamabad entente will continue no matter what, because the Americans want to build pipelines from Central Asia to Pakistan via Afghanistan—this is the shortest route to the Asian markets. The 1,271 km proposed pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan will terminate at Multan, where it will merge with an existing pipeline system leading to the seaport of Karachi. The execution of this pipeline plan, which was floated during the early days of the Taliban, would mean a permanent U.S. presence in an area which is vital for Russia, India, and China for security reasons.

This is why Brajesh Mishra suddenly departed for face-to-face discussions in Washington. Ostensibly, Washington has urged India to "slow down" its political and reconstruction work in Afghanistan, because this was impeding Musharraf from cracking down on hard-liners in Pakistan. Reports suggest that Musharraf reportedly threatened to "step up" activities in Afghanistan if India opened up consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar, as India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha promised during his visit to Afghanistan in August. This apparently prompted American fears of fresh terror attacks on its forces or on the floundering Hamid Karzai regime, whose writ is yet to extend beyond Kabul.