

Are leaders of India, China and Russia ready for a radical breakthrough?

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The long-awaited meeting of the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia in New Delhi on February 14, was, at one level, merely the latest in a series of trilateral meetings at this level held annually since 2002, generally on the margins of multilateral gatherings.



It was, however, only the second stand-alone meeting, the first one having taken place in Vladivostok in June 2005. It was also the first meeting of the three foreign ministers after their leaders met in St Petersburg in July 2006 on the margins of the G-8 summit. The fact that the latest meeting took place in one of the capitals, again a first, gave it comparatively much higher profile and visibility.

Russia has been the keenest proponent, and the driving force, of the concept of closer consultation and cooperation among India, China and Russia. The idea of trilateral cooperation was initiated by then Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1998.

It was Russia that hosted the first foreign ministers meeting in New York, the first stand-alone meeting at Vladivostok and the leaders' summit at St. Petersburg. Last week, the Russian foreign minister made a special visit to Delhi for the trilateral meeting, which was dovetailed with the Chinese foreign minister's bilateral visit to India.

Russia's enthusiasm for trilateral cooperation is easy to understand. From being the co-equal of the United States (in its incarnation as the Soviet Union), it was contemptuously, if mistakenly, relegated by the West to strategic irrelevance in the post-Cold War era.

Boris Yeltsin's overtures to get Russia accepted by the West into its fold were spurned. Meanwhile, as NATO steadily crept eastwards, to the very borders of Russia, and the US succeeded in getting a foothold in Russia's strategic neighbourhood, especially Ukraine and Georgia, Russia's security fears were heightened.

From a strategic perspective, Russia realises that on its own it is not strong enough to challenge the West, specifically the US. China and India are the only countries that are large enough players and sufficiently independent-minded to be potential partners in this strategic balancing act.

Russia may also have felt that a triangular relationship involving Russia could facilitate better understanding between India and China. This would minimise possible contradictions in Russia's ties

with two of its most important partners, and thereby ward off unpleasant choices for Russia.

The New Delhi meeting will compel the US to sit up and take notice. A few years ago, when the US straddled the world like a colossus, these three countries thought it prudent not to provoke the US, with whom the stakes of each of these countries were higher than with one another.

Thus, the early trilateral meetings of foreign ministers were formal and devoid of substance, with deliberately low-key publicity. As the three countries' economic and military clout have risen, so has their self-confidence, and their willingness to challenge the US world view, even if this is accompanied by a reiteration of ostensibly reassuring and loud disclaimers that trilateral cooperation is 'not directed against the interests of any other country.'

Objectively, too, the US remains very important to each of the three countries, and the foreign ministers cannot be faulted for their caution. At the same time, President Vladimir Putin's extremely significant, blunt address at the Munich security conference earlier this month, China ASAT test, and India's conscious efforts to reach out to Iran and Myanmar are signals to the US that all three countries intend to follow an independent foreign policy that serves their respective national interests.

The Joint Statement issued after the New Delhi meeting contains many interesting nuances in this direction. It is noteworthy that its overwhelming emphasis is on the convergence of views on broad strategic issues, rather than on specific areas of trilateral cooperation.

In a thinly veiled critique of US global policies and behaviour, the foreign ministers, we are told, emphasised the 'strong commitment' of the three countries to multilateral diplomacy, and exchanged views on 'how international relations are being presently conducted.'

Their discussions on developments in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, West Asia, and the Korean peninsula, brought out their common approach on these issues, and a global perspective clearly very different from the US world-view. The absence of any specific mention of regional issues in the Joint Statement may be only because the ministers may have thought it prudent not to directly provoke the US by coming out with an agreed formal formulation on these issues.

More areas of strategic convergence are likely to emerge if Russia and China agree to India's proposal to host a trilateral seminar, with the participation of not only scholars but officials too, later this year on the 'emerging geo-strategic trends.'

In calling for a 'more even distribution of development resources and influence,' and the attainment of a 'more stable and balanced' multi-polar world order through the instrumentality of the UN, the three countries have, for the first time, collectively signalled that they too, not just the West, must have a say in how the world is governed and how its limited resources are exploited.

The disaster in Iraq and the looming confrontation with Iran explain their common concern that cooperation rather than confrontation, with an important role for the UN, should govern approaches to regional and global affairs.

Central Asia also came up for discussion. Although since the mid-20th century the foreign policies of Russia, China and India were broadly oriented in a direction away from Eurasia and towards Europe, East Asia and South Asia respectively rather than towards the continental landmass, today's changed circumstances compel all three countries to look at developments in Eurasia much more seriously.

As continental powers whose respective back doors, so to speak, open in the fragile, volatile and strategically important region of Central Asia, it is perfectly logical that India, China and Russia should be actively exploring avenues of cooperation to ensure that this region remains peaceful and stable.

The broad strategic convergence of the policies of these three countries in this region is evident in their participation in the Central Asia-centric Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where Russia and China are members, and India an observer.

Given the institutional weaknesses of the Central Asian states, there are many potential dangers emanating from this region that could threaten the security and stability of all three countries. Separatist tendencies and terrorist activities exist precisely in those regions of India, China and Russia that are contiguous to Central Asia.

Faced as all three countries are with terrorist and separatist activities (Chechnya for Russia, Xinjiang for China, and Kashmir for India), there was considerable meeting ground on this issue among the three foreign ministers.

Against this background, they had little difficulty in agreeing that there can be no justification for any act of terrorism irrespective of motivations, as well as in rejecting selective approaches and double standards in countering terrorism. There was agreement in conceptual terms and in the intention to develop practical cooperation in multilateral and regional frameworks and through coordinated trilateral action. It remains to be seen what would be the concrete forms of such cooperation.

In addition, the US military presence in the region, which is likely to be a long-term one, poses an incipient threat to all three countries about which none of them can be sanguine. The formulation in the Joint Statement that Russia and China 'would actively facilitate early realisation of mutually beneficial contribution of India to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,' and a recent statement by the Russian Ambassador to India, provide indications that India may soon be invited to become a full member of the Central Asia-centric Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Were that to happen, it could become a matter of serious strategic concern to the US that tends to regard the SCO as an anti-US alliance.

While many ideas for trilateral cooperation have been discussed among scholars in a number of trilateral academic meetings organised over the last few years, no visible progress on the ground has been made so far. The ministers identified energy, transport infrastructure, health, and high technology as promising areas for joint cooperation and collaboration.

Hopefully, the proposed expert-level meetings, and the business meet in India later this year, will come up with practical areas of trilateral economic cooperation.

Energy is an obvious area of mutually beneficial cooperation if the three countries are willing to think creatively and boldly. Energy-deficient, fast-growing and geographically proximate India and China could become long-term reliable markets for energy-surplus Russia, provided Russia takes a strategic decision that its enormous energy resources should be available to fuel the growth of India and China instead of being committed principally to Western markets.

The considerable hydropower potential in Siberia and Tibet could be tapped for transmitting electricity via Xinjiang and Tibet to the large Indian market just across the mountains. Overland pipeline projects, if technically and economically feasible, could transport Russian and Caspian oil

and gas to markets in India via China, as well as to global markets via India's warm water ports.

This could be cheaper and also obviate many of the risks associated with exclusive reliance on maritime energy supply routes. China is already exploring alternative routes via Pakistan for transporting Gulf oil to China.

It may well find a sea-land route via India more reliable and secure, particularly if there is a reciprocal dependence -- India's on Russian and Central Asian gas transiting China on its way to India, and China's on Gulf oil transiting India on its way to China. Joint India-China-Russia investments in energy projects in Russia and elsewhere, and swap deals are other possible areas of cooperation.

Another exciting and potentially very significant area of cooperation is high technology. If the three countries pool their assets and synergise their strengths, they could emerge as an alternative nucleus for development of futuristic technologies, and break the current technological dominance of the West. Information technology and biotechnology have already been identified as areas meriting special attention.

There is some talk of developing civilian aircraft that could break the duopoly of Boeing and Airbus, and of cooperation in the field of pharmaceuticals that could pose a challenge to the cartel of American and European multinational pharmaceutical companies.

Controlling between them about one-and-a-half trillion dollars of foreign exchange, the three countries have also talked of cooperation in financial services.

The New Delhi meeting of the foreign ministers of India, China and Russia has put trilateral cooperation firmly on the rails. There will be regular foreign ministerial meetings, with the next to be hosted by China. Gone is the tentativeness and hesitation that characterised earlier meetings. The atmospherics of the latest meeting were good, its outcome substantive, and the mood of the participants upbeat and confident.

The burgeoning trilateral consultations and cooperation constitute the most serious and credible endeavour to craft a multi-polar world. But there is no strategic alliance -- at least not yet. What we are seeing is a demonstration of how in today's complex global scenario there can be issue-based coalitions of states. It is the fructification of even one or two large projects of the kind indicated above that would hardwire the three countries into a long-term mutual interdependence and lead to a true strategic alliance.

For this, conscious strategic decisions will be needed in all countries. Are the leaders of India, China and Russia ready for a radical conceptual breakthrough to take advantage of the new geo-political realities of the 21st century?

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