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Article

Indian and Russian Engagement in Eurasia: New Areas of Cooperation

Nirmala Joshi

Abstract

Building new linkages with Russia and reaching out to Eurasia is part of India's strategic vision along with its Connect Central Asia Policy. Simultaneously, Russia's pivot to Asia policy has been accelerated with the enunciation of its Greater Eurasia concept. The coincidence of similar visions has augured well for India-Russia relationship. President Putin's aim is to diversify investment, trade and build cooperative relations with the countries of Asia-Pacific. It is in the context of diversification that Russia was keen to enhance its engagement with India. This in turn coincided with India's quest to reach out to Eurasia. Vast areas, including in the Arctic region, have been opened up by Russia for Indian investment in its Asiatic region and the Far East. The two countries are expanding their ties in many new areas, with a salutary impact on their strategic partnership.

Indian and Russian engagement in the past decade has witnessed a marked upturn overcoming the past hiatus as new areas of cooperation are emerging. It was the compatibility of geopolitical, strategic and economic interests that had augured well in the past. The watershed shifts in international politics from Europe to Asia, especially Eurasia, in the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, had a fundamental impact on the regional compatibility of Indo-Russia relations. The old moorings of the relationship gave way to new realities and factors.

The vast Eurasian land mass with its rich natural resources and its geopolitical location has always attracted world attention. Major external powers as well as regional powers quickly established their presence in the Eurasian region. An additional factor that added to the complexity of the region was the phenomenal rise of non-conventional threats such as religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, etc. The continuation of a

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resilient insurgency in Afghanistan even after the bulk withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces was a worrisome factor.

The wealth of natural resources led to a struggle for Eurasia to access and even control the vital resources. The ongoing struggle for Eurasia led many experts to view the scramble among the powers as a return of British geographer Halford Mackinder's theory of geopolitics focused on the 'Heartlands of Eurasia' and 'Pivot of History'. Mackinder had prophesized in the early twentieth century the critical significance of the region for empires/powers of the day in their ambition to conquer/control the world. Today Eurasia is witnessing a struggle among powers to acquire and control natural resources, construct mega land corridors and a role in the global order. In the process three tendencies have become visible: cooperative, competitive and conflicting. In the present scenario a prominent tendency is the strong partnership between former rivals, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. Besides Japan, South Korea, the European Union (EU) and the countries belonging to Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have also established their presence, albeit in a modest form. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) are striving to consolidate their independence and foster regional cooperation, so that they could collectively ward off pressure exerted by major powers. Hence an interplay of the above tendencies is an ongoing feature in Eurasia, though the power play has not yet sharpened, nevertheless Eurasian politics will shape the history of the region and in the process, it could impact the future of the evolving global order.

On the other hand, India is aspiring to play a wider role in Asia, as a leading power. Indian aspiration is in accordance with its strategic vision that stretches from the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia against the backdrop of a changing Eurasia. Russia is keen to rejuvenate its ties with India. It recognizes India's ability to play a role in the crucial Indian Ocean region. Given India's rising economic profile in the international arena, Russia is keen to engage with India in Eurasia. India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has opened an opportunity to collaborate and collectively engage the region. Moreover, by the turn of the century Russia had accelerated its Pivot to Asia policy, and has accorded high priority to Eurasia in its foreign policy. Russian focus is on the development of Eurasia where external powers, especially China, are striving to establish its presence. Due to its geographical contiguity to Eurasia, China is in an advantageous position unlike other powers.

The article attempts to explore and analyze areas of cooperation between India and Russia in Eurasia. Can India and Russia re-create a sustainable partnership? In order to understand and evaluate the nature of evolving India-Russian engagement, an analysis of Russia's strategic thinking on Eurasia would be useful.

Russian Perspectives on Eurasia

It was former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov who gave a definite turn to Eurasia in Russian Foreign Policy in 1998. He introduced a new concept of security which included three basic principles: (a) multi-polarity as a governing principle of international relations, an active opposition to attempts to establish a unipolar world; (b) constructive partnership with all countries instead of mobile or permanent coalitions and; (c) integration on a voluntary basis within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹ Primakov's concept undoubtedly aimed at restoring Russia's status as a great power. In his view Eurasia was the key to achieving this goal.

As a consequence, Russia's pivot to Asia policy began to gather momentum. Apart from the geopolitical motives economic considerations also began to figure prominently in Russian strategic thinking. The vast region was underdeveloped and as a result outmigration from the sparsely populated region (6.3 million) had started. The people were in search of employment and a better quality of life. Paradoxically, on the other side of the border with China in the east, large numbers from an estimated population of 110 million in the three Manchurian provinces were crossing over to Russia. They were in search of markets as well as to harness the wealth of natural resources. The rapid Chinese migration was a matter of deep concern for Russia, both at the official and non-official levels. Acknowledging Russia's failure in its earlier attempts to accelerate regional development, President Vladimir Putin said "I do not want to dramatize the situation, but unless we make real effort soon, then even the indigenous population will in several decades from now be speaking mainly Japanese, Chinese and Korean..."² Echoing similar thoughts, President Dmitry Medvedev said in 2012 that Russia must "protect its depopulated eastern territories from excessive inflow of citizens of neighboring countries".

At the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg (16-17 June 2017) President Putin elaborated on his thinking on Eurasia. He proposed a new vision of economic cooperation called a "Great Eurasian Partnership" which is also referred to as "Greater Eurasia". President Putin had already initiated an integrated economic project, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in October 2011. The EEU envisaged a gradual lifting of custom duties, border controls and removal of restrictions on visits and employment for all participants, at the same time tightening controls on the Eurasian Union's common borders.³ The EEU was an exclusivist project, its aim was regional development. In 2003 Russia had already launched the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with the objective of integrating the defence systems of its members: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus.

Russia's initiation of the EEU coincided with China's launch of a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB, 2013). The SREB is also referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It was China's attempt to symbolically use the notion of the Silk Road to revive Chinese trade across Eurasia and give it new meaning and aims. The BRI emerged from China's earlier "Go out West" strategy pursued under Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. A primary goal at that time was the development of its Xinjiang region and to focus on trade, investment and diplomatic cooperation. From the long-term perspective China hoped to leverage its growing economic interests and influence across Eurasia. A noticeable aspect of both the projects was the critical importance of Central Asia; it was the core of their projects. Consequently, competition with Russia was inevitable, though at present their partnership is strong. However, given China's economic rise and its increasing footprints in Central Asia, Russia has perhaps sought a geographic extension of its concept of Greater Eurasia by going beyond the post-Soviet space and to make it an inclusive project. It reflected Russian establishment's recognition that, in order to bring economic prosperity to the region the narrowly focused EEU will not probably be sufficient. The big Asian economic engines must be engaged.⁴ In his quest for alternatives President Putin's aim was to diversify investment, trade and build cooperative relations with the countries of Asia-Pacific. It is in the context of diversification that Russia wanted to engage with India. This in turn coincided with India's quest to reach out to Eurasia.

Areas of Cooperation

Since the Russian focus was on regional development and economic betterment, Putin believed that in the economic sphere India could play a constructive role. The Joint Statement issued at the end of President Putin's visit to India in October 2018 opened up new vistas for economic cooperation. The statement identified areas of engagement on a long-term basis.⁵ Among the highlights were the establishment of a Strategic Economic Dialogue, a first of its kind. The Indian side would be represented by NITI Aayog and the government sponsored Invest India, and the Russian side by its Ministry of Economic Development. In May 2019 the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) and Invest India were part of a delegation that visited Vladivostok (15-17 May 2019). The aim was to explore and assess business opportunities in the Far East, especially in agriculture, agro processing and forest produce. Other focus areas were the mining sector, infrastructure development, health care, including alternative medicines, etc. Earlier the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FICCI) had also toured the Far East. The FICCI brought out a comprehensive Report on the opportunities in Russia's Asiatic regions, the Far East and the Arctic region in September 2017. The Report identified potential areas for collaboration with Russia in the Far East.⁶

In the energy sector both India and Russia expressed their satisfaction. Earlier India had invested USD 2.5 billion in Sakhalin I, a petroleum producing oil field and in Sakhalin III a natural gas field. An Indian Consortium has invested in Vankohft and Tass Yuryakh Neftegazodbycha in Russia and Moscow has ensured the participation of its PJSC Rosneft oil company in the Essar Oil capital.⁷ A new area in the energy sector is the opening up of the Arctic region. Opportunities for joint exploration and development of oil fields in the Russian territory, including the Arctic shelf of Russia and joint development of projects on the shelf of the Pechora and Okhotsk Seas have been examined.⁸ In this context the visit of Indian Minister for Petroleum Dharmendra Pradhan to Moscow in August 2019 is significant. Cooperation in the field of civil nuclear energy is also continuing, with Russia providing four nuclear reactors to India's Kudankulam project in Tamil Nadu.

In the vast Eurasian landmass an efficient transport system is an imperative necessity. At present infrastructure development connecting producing areas with the markets is inadequate, especially the ports. Realising the inadequacy of the existing transport links Russia has announced the Transport Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2030. In this context the idea of a Trans Eurasian Belt Development (TERP) project was put forward by leading Russian scholars and supported by the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In their perception "Russia can and should become the integrator of the Eurasian continent". However, due to financial constraints the idea did not take off. Now that Vladivostok has been declared a free city offering several economic and tax concessions to investors, and plans have been mooted to create free industrial and trade zones in the vicinity, it is an urgent need to build modern efficient transport corridors. In this regard two International Transport Corridors have been planned – Primorye-I and II in the Primorskoye region linking with Vladivostok. These developmental projects are expected to facilitate trade in agricultural and forest produce. Russia's main agricultural produce are soya beans, maize and pulp. Russia is encouraging joint ventures in agriculture as vast tracts of land are available. Fishing industry holds immense promise and requires the establishment of light industry for packaging. There is a real possibility for a shipping route opening up between Vladivostok and Chennai. Besides the prospects for ship building and repairs are other potential areas for cooperation between India and Russia. In August 2019 Indian Minister for Commerce Piyush Goyal visited Vladivostok and partnership proposals were put forward between India's States and Far East provinces.

A new opportunity that has opened up for India is the development of the Arctic route or the Northern Sea Route. Russia has made the Arctic region a part of its pivot to Asia and is keen to use the economic potential of the region primarily in constructing the Arctic route. Prime Minister Medvedev said Russia's vision for the region as part of its

privileged sphere of interest. The Arctic region is believed to contain 13 per cent of the world's undiscovered oil and almost 30 per cent of its undiscovered gas, making it a key strategic resource region of Russia. Russian policy has included extracting the region's natural resources, in part by creating a transportation and communication network along the Arctic coast.⁹ Some of the areas where Russia wants joint ventures with foreign companies is in harnessing its vast forest resources, especially timber and development of coal terminals. One of Russia's largest export items are gold and diamond. There are significant opportunities in their mining as well. Now that Russia has opened up its Eurasian landmass and the Far East for economic development, undoubtedly the opportunities are enormous.

Deeper Engagement

In view of the huge potential for cooperation in the Asiatic regions, the Far East and the Arctic a new chapter in strengthening the relationship has been opened. The beginning was made by the visit to India in December 2017 of Yuri Trutnev, Deputy Prime Minister and the President's Envoy for the Far East. In his opinion, "India is really an important neighbor and we must seriously think about working together. I think it makes sense to work out issues of closer cooperation with Indian companies to see what we can work on together".¹⁰ Subsequently, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj led a delegation of more than 30 representatives of leading Indian companies to participate in the Fourth Eastern Economic Forum (EEF). On that occasion India inaugurated a Russia Desk and Invest India sponsored by the Government. "The platform in Vladivostok will form the basis for further strengthening of Russian-Indian relations resulting in new projects in the Russian Far East," said Anton Kobayakov an adviser to President Putin.¹¹

A major milestone in the on-going interaction was when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was invited to be the chief guest at the Fifth EEF in September 2019. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Trutnev met in New Delhi in June 2019 to work out the modalities for the visit and discussed the whole gamut of the relationship as well. In July 2019 Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov was in India and further discussed areas of cooperation. Collaboration in key sectors such as trade, energy and space as well as the summit meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin were also discussed. In order to attract investors to the Far East and the Asiatic regions, Russia has offered several incentives such as visa free entry, tax concessions, setting up special economic zones for raw material processing, incentives for investments in resource development with arrangements for 100 per cent buy back with some value addition.

Another important dimension of economic development is the digital economy. In fact, the digital economy gives priority not so much to material resources as to human capital. The creation of federal districts in Russia was followed by the establishment of federal universities in each of them to raise young talent, including the Far East. A perceptive article by Viktoria Panova states: "The Far Eastern Federal University is developing the ideas for integrating Russia's Far East into Asia-Pacific and driving development of the region not only by training qualified personnel, but also by launching International Scientific, Educational and Innovation projects."²² Collaboration with India in the area of digital economy would be of mutual benefit.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Vladivostok (4-5 September 2019) as the chief guest at the Fifth Eastern Economic Forum was not only significant, but his speech at the Forum brought out in a succinct manner the importance of the Far East for India. He said "we are about to start a new era of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, when ships will start sailing between Vladivostok and Chennai, and when Vladivostok will become India's spring board in North East Asia market The Far East will become a confluence of the Eurasian Union on one side and the open free and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the other..."²³ Media reports stated that Prime Minister Modi added India's Act East Policy could also be considered as Act Far East. India will provide USD 1 billion Line of Credit to further contribute to the development of the Far East. At the end of the visit 25 agreements were signed pertaining to trade, defence cooperation, infrastructure development, including the Northern Sea Route, mining, etc.

New opportunities have opened up for India as Russia has offered cooperation in a variety of areas on a long-term basis. However, the cooperative aspect must be pursued in a sustained manner. This will give a major stimulus to India-Russia relations, both at the bilateral and regional level.

Geopolitical Perspectives

Apart from the economic development and promoting commercial links, geopolitical factors have also been a prime motivation for Russia's Pivot to Asia policy. In the late nineties of the last decade Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov's assumption that Eurasia was the key to restore Russia's great power status. In 2006 he reiterated his ideas about a multipolar world as logical path. He said "Considering Russia's history, intellectual resources, huge size, natural resources and finally the level of development of its Armed Forces, this country will not agree to the status of a state that is led. It will seek to establish itself as an independent center of a multipolar world."²⁴ Earlier in 2003 Russia had formed the CSTO, followed by the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2011.

Meanwhile, China's increasing foot prints in Eurasia, especially in Central Asia, and an assertive foreign policy have become a matter of concern for Russia. As a consequence Russia expanded the geographic expanse of its concept of EEU to involve other countries (2017), such as Japan, India, ASEAN, and Turkey, among others, along with China. Interestingly, the countries mentioned by President Putin are mostly located on the southern rim of Eurasia and importantly had openings on the Indo-Pacific. The widening of the concept reflects the Russian political establishment's acknowledgement that in order to bring economic prosperity to the region a narrowly focused EEU will not suffice. By inviting India to cooperate in its Asiatic region and the Far East, it was acknowledging India's ability to play a role in Russia's attempts to diversify investments and build new and cooperative linkages. Russia has also encouraged Indian engagement with Central Asia.

Cooperation in Central Asia

In the initial years after the Soviet break-up, Indian attempts to rejuvenate its rich historical and cultural legacy with Central Asia were looked upon with disfavour by Russia. In its strategic thinking Central Asia was its 'near abroad' or a special zone of interest, whereas for India, Central Asia was part of its extended neighbourhood. Since 2014, the geopolitical landscape of the region has undergone a change. Russia and China have accelerated their key foreign policy projects. Both the countries want to emerge as a centre/pole in a multipolar world. By initiating their respective projects-- the CSTO and Greater Eurasia, and the SREB-- Russia and China's objectives are to build their respective spheres of influence. In the process Central Asia gained critical importance for both the powers. But Russia's weaker financial position as a result of the imposition of sanctions by the West on Russia, has left China in an advantageous position. This explains China's growing engagement in Central Asia, not only at the economic level, but gradually in the security sphere as well.

Given the evolving changes, Russia was keen that India engage with the Central Asian States in infrastructure and economic development. Indian expertise and experience in agriculture and environment, especially to offset the adverse effects of the Kara Kum desert in Turkmenistan, could be productive. Growing Indian presence would imply that China was not the only principal player in Central Asia.

Meanwhile, India had already initiated its Connect Central Asia Policy, which laid emphasis on connectivity with the region. The rejuvenation of the International North-South Transport Corridor will enhance India's links with the region. India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has opened another window for India and Russia to

work in a collaborative manner at the regional level on issues of common concern, such as combating religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, etc.

Conclusion

The beginning of new areas of cooperation in Russia's Asiatic region and the Far East has heralded a new phase in India's foreign policy. Reaching out to Eurasia and building new linkages with Russia is part of India's strategic vision along with its Connect Central Asia Policy. Russia's pivot to Asia was accelerated with the enunciation of its Greater Eurasia concept. This coincidence of similar visions has augured well for the relationship. Vast areas for economic cooperation, including in the Arctic region, have been thrown open by Russia to India for investment and engagement in the Asiatic region and the Far East. It also had a salutary impact on India-Russia relations by broadening the areas of interests in the strategic sphere as well. This would in turn provide an impetus to wider regional cooperation. As rightly observed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India's Act East Policy is now Act Far East Policy.

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