

ISAS Insights

No. 417 – 6 June 2017

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The Strategic Significance of the Modi-Putin Summit in Saint Petersburg

The meeting between Russia's President Vladimir Putin and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Saint Petersburg on 1 and 2 June 2017 acquired unusual strategic importance in diplomatic, not defence-related terms. India and Pakistan, the estranged South Asian neighbours, will join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as new members at its summit which begins on 8 June 2017. This marks a challenging prospect in the Russia-India engagement itself, going forward. China and Russia are prime movers in the SCO. India's recent refusal to join Beijing's global-scale connectivity initiative which has been endorsed by Putin, and Moscow's growing interest in good relations with Pakistan, are factors that Modi may have to reckon with in the existing Russia-China-India trilateral forum.

P S Suryanarayana¹

Russia's regular engagement with India at their highest political level is no novelty. However, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin for the 18th annual summit between the two countries in Saint Petersburg on 1 June 2017 was of much topical importance.

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Their latest meeting was unusually significant because of the likely admission of India and its neighbour, Pakistan, to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as its new full-fledged members² at its summit in Astana (Kazakhstan) from 8 to 9 June 2017. Announcing the SCO enlargement, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said on 1 June 2017, “We sincerely hope that after their admission, India and Pakistan will act in strict accordance with the SCO Charter and the Treaty on Long-term Good-neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation.”³ This can be seen as a sobering Chinese message to both India and Pakistan at the same time. At the SCO, Russia has been a prime mover along with China.

The upcoming Astana summit may well mark the first face-to-face diplomatic encounter between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping since India’s absence from China’s Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) summit in Beijing in mid-May 2017. Until 4 June 2017, there was no formal announcement on the level of India’s participation in the imminent summit of the SCO but Putin announced that he would be meeting Modi during this Astana summit.⁴

India’s refusal to join China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for global connectivity is a new strategic dynamic in geo-economics and geopolitics.⁵ Interestingly, in this context, Russia is indeed seeking to harmonise its own Eurasian connectivity plans with China’s larger vision. Making this clear at the BRF summit in Beijing, Putin had said, “Russia and its partners are building the Eurasian Economic Union [EAEU]...We welcome China’s One Belt, One Road initiative [OBOR, now known as BRI]...I believe that by adding together the potential of all the integration formats like the EAEU, the OBOR, the SCO and the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], we can build the foundation for a larger Eurasian partnership.”⁶ In contrast, Modi had clearly signalled India’s displeasure over Xi’s initiative by staying away from the BRF summit. Objecting to the ongoing construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a BRI project which passes through areas which Islamabad controls but New Delhi regards as its own rightful territory, India’s External Affairs Ministry emphasised that

² India and Pakistan are at present Observers at the SCO.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1467100.shtmlSCO. Accessed on 2 June 2017.

⁴ Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54654>. Accessed on 2 June 2017.

⁵ For details, read P S Suryanarayana, *Belt and Road Initiative: China Acts ‘Global’, India Plays ‘Local’*, ISAS Insights No. 411 – 23 May 2017, available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg>.

⁶ Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/speeches/54491>. Accessed on 4 June 2017. The author was present at the BRF meetings in Beijing in mid-May 2017.

“no country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁷

Another factor that raised the profile of the latest Russia-India summit was Modi’s publicly unstated but obvious attempt to secure Putin’s good offices to address and, if possible, mitigate a number of India’s concerns over the current trajectory of Chinese foreign policy. Deeply relevant to this particular sub-context is the future of the existing Russia-China-India (RCI) trilateral forum. Compared to India’s expectations, what was Russia’s perspective at the Saint Petersburg summit?

Russia’s Full-Spectrum Promise

In the presence of Modi, Putin publicly articulated his priorities towards India in detail, “Now the Russian-Indian partnership has *a genuinely strategic and especially privileged nature...* I would like to draw attention to our successful cooperation in the civilian nuclear industry, which was noted in my conversation with the Prime Minister. The first unit of the Kudankulam nuclear power plant [a Russia-India project in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu] was put into operation. The most reliable, latest Russian technology was used in its construction. The plant’s second unit has also started to generate electricity. At a joint teleconference in October 2016 with Narendra Modi we launched the construction of the plant’s third and fourth units. And we [now] reaffirmed our *intention to build in India at least 12 Russian-designed energy units, which will make a large contribution to the development of India’s nuclear industry.* We also agreed with our Indian partners to deepen cooperation in the military-technical field on the basis of a bilateral programme through 2020. Notably, our cooperation is not limited to direct supplies of the latest Russian military equipment to our Indian partners. The assembly of high-tech military products has been set up in India with Russia’s participation. We agreed with the Prime Minister to *continue to jointly develop and manufacture modern weapons systems.*”⁸ (Emphasis added).

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_a_query_on_participation_of_India_in_OBORBRI_Forum. Accessed on 14 May 2017.

⁸ Kremlin, *Russian President Vladimir Putin’s statement following Russia-India talks in St. Petersburg on 1 June 2017*. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54660>. Accessed on 2 June 2017.

It is evident from these remarks that Putin has highlighted two aspects to showcase Russia's "special and privileged strategic partnership" with India at this juncture when critics have come to view this nomenclature, agreed upon in 2010, as a mere hyperbole. Doubts on this score emanate from Russia's web of deep and dense contacts with China, at one echelon, and emerging links with Pakistan, at another level. It is elementary knowledge that India has a chequered equation with China and a complicated relationship with Pakistan.

The two strands of Putin's latest gesture relate to Moscow's long-standing military sales to New Delhi and the Russia-India nuclear cooperation on a parallel civil track. First, the Russian-aided atomic energy plant at Kudankulam is seen by both countries as a poster-showpiece, notwithstanding the local civil-society concerns over normative safety aspects as nuclear power units. Secondly, emblematic of India's military partnership with Russia are their development and production of the *Brahmos* supersonic cruise missile and their plans to co-develop and co-produce a fifth-generation fighter aircraft.⁹ By drawing attention to these aspects, even if implicitly in his public statement, Putin has sought to allay the current doubts about the vibrancy of the much-clichéd Russia-India strategic partnership. These doubts stem from the extraordinary closeness between Russia and China, as exemplified by Putin's endorsement of Xi's BRI. Therefore, the outlook for Russia-Indian ties, going forward, is to be viewed in the context of China's new-globalisation diplomacy and Pakistan's likely entry into the SCO at the same time as that of India.

In the space-age metaphor, the conventional strategic wisdom is that Russia has gradually cruised into a geostationary orbit around China because of the continuing animus of the United States (US) towards the post-Soviet Kremlin since the rise of Putin as a 'nationalist'. Despite the initial expectations in some quarters that the current US President Donald Trump might seek to pull Russia out of its orbit around China, Putin's latest demonstration of support for Xi's BRI is the context in which India and Pakistan will be joining the SCO.

⁹ India's defence relationship with Russia is often alluded to in their official statements as by Putin in Saint Petersburg on 1 June 2017. The author has learnt from defence sources, who cannot be identified by name or designation, in Beijing in mid-May 2017 that Russia's cooperation with India in developing a fifth-generation fighter aircraft must also be seen in the context of China's access to Russian knowhow regarding engines in the same domain.

A Likely Strategic Axis

Two other factors of consequence to India are the enduring China-Pakistan “all-weather strategic partnership” and the warming relations between Russia and Pakistan. Viewed in this overarching perspective, India may have to reckon with the likely strategic axis of goodwill among China, Russia and Pakistan in the enlarged SCO. Modi can perhaps draw comfort from Putin’s latest reassuring words about the Russia-India “privileged partnership”. However, the ground reality in the new SCO will be the centrality of China, whose BRI diplomacy can either be the glue or a diluting factor, depending on the Sino-Indian exchanges, or their absence, over the BRI and related issues. Relevant to these possibilities is the existence of the RCI caucus. Pakistan is a country of interest to both China and Russia, in that order. For Russia, access to the warm-water port of Gwadar in Pakistan is increasingly attractive, given the Chinese control over it.¹⁰

In the author’s view, China and Russia may indeed seek to enlarge the RCI forum, at least over a period of time, to include Pakistan. For now, it is left to Modi’s diplomatic skills to engage China in the SCO and even in the RCI group as and when it meets at the summit level. Connectivity and other issues will inevitably cover the role and relevance of Pakistan as well. At stake is India’s much-publicised consternation over the CPEC and Beijing’s perceived ‘nonchalance’ over New Delhi’s objections in this regard.

Ahead of the potential scenario of such intra-mural differences among the members of an enlarged SCO (even leaving aside India-Pakistan differences over Kashmir), Modi engaged Putin in Saint Petersburg on New Delhi’s enthusiasm for Russia’s EAEU. Closely linked to this Union are Putin’s plans for an inter-continental North-South Transport Corridor. A complex issue is how Putin might want to connect this corridor to Xi’s Asia-Europe “Silk Road Economic Belt” under the BRI. Modi’s diplomatic dexterity will be tested by whether he can influence Russia in due course to join India to persuade China to redesign the CPEC in a manner acceptable to India and also refashion the BRI itself as a globalisation blueprint based

¹⁰ Russia’s interest in Gwadar frequently figures in diplomatic discourse over China-Pakistan-Russia relations. For Russia’s first defence-related agreement with Pakistan, read AFP, *Pakistan, Russia Sign ‘Milestone’ Military Cooperation Pact*, 20 November 2014, available at <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20141120/DEFREG03/311200041/Pakistan-R>. Accessed on 29 December 2014.

on the “universally recognised international norms” which New Delhi outlined while staying away from the BRF summit in mid-May 2017.

For now, Modi and Putin have indicated a meeting of minds on international norms for regional and global connectivity, “We appreciate the compelling logic of regional connectivity for peace, progress and prosperity. *We believe that connectivity must be strengthened. It should be based on dialogue and consent of all parties concerned with due respect to sovereignty.* The Russian and Indian sides being guided by the principles of transparency, sustainability and responsibility, reiterate their commitment to build effective infrastructure for the International North South Transport Corridor and implementation of the Green Corridor.”¹¹ (Emphasis added).

Putin’s agreement with Modi about the sanctity of state sovereignty in the implementation of connectivity projects is worth noting. India opposes the CPEC because it passes through areas that Islamabad controls but New Delhi regards as its sovereign territory. However, in the absence of a categorical statement by Putin with specific reference to this Corridor, there is no hard evidence to suggest that Putin will support India as China presses ahead with this project through a disputed territory.

Other issues of Modi’s concern and Putin’s interest involving Xi as the potential arbiter include India’s bid for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The joint statement issued after Modi’s latest talks with Putin is no guide in this regard while Xi’s lukewarm attitude (at best) towards India on these two issues is well-known.¹²

In addition, there were some sound bites from Modi and Putin on their stated resolve to increase the low levels of two-way Russia-India trade and investment. However, the real significance of the latest Russia-India summit and Modi’s participation as the guest-of-honour in the Saint

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28507/Saint_Petersburg_Declaration_by_the_Russian_Federation_and_the_Republic_of_India_A_vision_for_the_21st_century (Accessed on 4 June 2017).

¹² China’s insistence on absolute consensus among all the parties concerned for India’s entry into the NSG as a member and the UNSC as a permanent member has been repeatedly emphasised by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons.

Petersburg Economic Forum on 1 and 2 June 2017 is that he could get a sense of Russia's attitude towards China in particular ahead of India's likely entry into the SCO.

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