

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Indo-Russian ties get a boost

A "strategic partnership" is emerging, which is especially important for stability in Central Asia.

Notwithstanding the political uncertainty that has gripped India, Moscow and New Delhi have embarked on a much broader strategic dialogue. The upcoming visit of Russian President Boris Yeltsin to India in January, the visit to India by First Deputy Prime Minister Anatoli Chubais on Dec. 17-19, and the Indo-Russian joint working group meeting in New Delhi which concluded in late December, are indicative of the process.

President Yeltsin, who had visited India in 1993 and met with Indian prime ministers in Moscow in 1994 and 1997, is, according to Indian observers, acutely alive to the need to develop a "strategic partnership" between India and Russia.

According to Academician Kutsenkov, Director of the Indian Studies Center in the Russian Academy of Sciences, the most important goals for Russia-India cooperation lie in establishing peace and stability in Central Asia. This would entail stopping the war in Afghanistan, normalizing the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border, settling the India-Pakistan conflict in Jammu and Kashmir along the principles laid down in the Moscow declaration on the protection of interests of multi-ethnic states, assisting the democratic and secular forces in the region, and fighting terrorism, separatism, and drug trafficking.

Kutsenkov said in a newspaper article last August that India's cooperation with the states of the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, and Kazakhstan is also in Russia's interests, because new kinds of transportation systems are in

the making. Kutsenkov did not explain what the new kinds of transportation systems would mean, but said that there are good grounds to expect faster growth in Russia-India trade.

During Chubais's visit, most of these issues were emphasized during discussions. Chubais made it clear that Moscow would like to set up a tariff-free trade area, or a preferential-trade area, with India. Reportedly, an expert group is looking at the concept of the free-trade area.

At the same time, the two parties quickly reached certain decisions involving other areas of cooperation. Russia and India came to terms on the financial and technological package for the two 1,000-megawatt Koodankulam nuclear reactors to be supplied by Russia. This would be the largest-ever project to be built through Indo-Russian cooperation, and would cost "several billion dollars," according to Chubais.

A protocol also has been signed which envisages wide-ranging cooperation in financial services aimed at facilitating two-way trade and investment flows. Moscow will allow two Indian banks to be set up in Russia, and in return, Indian banks will honor guarantees of 10 major Russian banks.

The two sides have also set up a joint maritime commission, which will hold its first meeting in Russia to arrange for a joint liner service linking ports in the two countries.

Also very much on the agenda of strategic partnership between the two nations is closer security relations. Indians have reportedly shown interest

in buying air defense systems from Russia. According to an unnamed Indian Defense Ministry official, the air defense systems, which India would like to build at home under Russian license, incorporates anti-aircraft, anti-short-range, and anti-ballistic missiles. The system has been identified as S-300, which could replace India's existing string of SAM-3 air defense missiles. The Russians claim that the S-300, which depends on satellite communication, not only attacks incoming missiles but also destroys its warhead, preventing it from dropping on cities or important installations.

The Russian-Indian working group that met on Dec. 19-21 in New Delhi prepared the proposed upcoming dialogue between President Yeltsin and Indian leaders on military, technical, and defense cooperation. The Indians are reportedly looking to obtain the know-how from Moscow to build Russian military hardware in India. The Indian aircraft industry is negotiating for license production of Sukhoi-30 multipurpose fighters.

The strengthening of Moscow-New Delhi ties became necessary in light of major developments in the area. To begin with, the cooperation between Moscow and Delhi was ruptured following the demise of the Soviet Union. The formerly high-profile relations between the two dwindled to a minimum. Trade plummeted to about one-fourth of what it was before.

At the same time, the necessity to stabilize Central Asia, to bring Iran into the mainstream of world political economy, and to stop the war in Afghanistan in order to develop the energy network and the Eurasian Land Bridge, has been noticed by both Delhi and Moscow. Both Washington's and Beijing's broad agreement with Moscow and Delhi on these issues has provided the necessary impetus in rebuilding their bilateral ties.