

India shows a keen interest in Central Asian affairs

by Ramtanu Maitra

After years of virtual silence on Central Asia policy, in July, India issued an important statement bringing developments in Central Asia into the center of its foreign policy decision-making process. At a two-day international conference to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the birth of the late Tajik Academician Babajan Gafurov, on July 28-29 in New Delhi, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee assured more than a dozen academics and experts from Central Asia and a large number of delegates from China, Russia, and India, that New Delhi “must do much more to realize the full potential of this rich geo-cultural family, of which we were and we will continue to be members.”

On the dias were the Chairman of the Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies of Calcutta, Dr. Devendra Kaushik; the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, Dr. R. Rybakov; and Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi.

Prime Minister Vajpayee reminded the large audience at the inauguration of the conference that “if countries of South Asia and Central Asia have to once again journey along the path of prosperity and happiness, they must take the route of peace, friendship, and cooperation.”

Need for peace, friendship, and cooperation

It is only natural that the Indian Prime Minister chose this occasion to emphasize the necessity for “peace, friendship, and cooperation.” Since last fall, militants had infiltrated into Indian Kashmir from Pakistan, carrying the flag of Islamic *jihad*, to wage irregular warfare against the Indian Army. Their objective was to capture territory and spread terrorism and militancy eastward. As the conference progressed, it became evident that the security of Central Asia, and the adjoining areas of India, Russia, China, and Pakistan, was foremost in the minds of most of the delegates.

While a number of Central Asian delegates focussed on Academician Gafurov, his life and works, their fear of mounting threats to Central Asia, from within and outside the region, was evident whenever they spoke. Indian academics and Central Asian scholars expressed similar opinions, insisting that “the concept of sovereignty must be complemented by the

concept of a country’s international responsibility before the global community for maintaining the existence of the seats of terrorism.” One Uzbek scholar pointed out that while his country seeks peace and stability in Central Asia, it is “not indifferent to the situation in neighboring Tajikistan and Afghanistan, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, and Chechnya.” He also noted that “the sad and tragic experience of terrorism accumulated on the Indian territories of Jammu and Kashmir has spread, yielding frightening fruit in Tajikistan and Chechnya.”

At the end of the conference, Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir Dr. Farooq Abdullah returned to the same theme. He told the Central Asian delegates that the Islam which is now preached across the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan and Pakistan, is not the Islam he or any devout Muslim knows. This is political Islam, and it can be defeated only through the combined efforts of like-minded Muslims of the entire region. He turned to the Chinese delegates and said that, today, India is the victim of this form of fundamentalism, but the days are not far away when China, as well, will be a victim. Seeking cooperation from the Chinese delegates, he said that roads between India and China should now be opened up, no matter who owns which part of the disputed territory. Such interaction between India and China, he said, is extremely urgent to fight the terrorism that is haunting his land.

Among the Central Asian delegates, the other common themes addressed were the rapid development of the multi-party nature of social and political structures, the secular character of society, and “the synthesis of the moral foundations of the Islamic culture.” They made it clear that the emergence of extremism in their respective countries is not a result of the nation’s and society’s development.

These phenomena—extremism and terrorism—are alien to the spiritual culture of the regional people. Rather, these phenomena have “emerged in our country as a result of the activities by special services of a number of unfriendly states, as well as cross-border terrorism and extremism,” said Uzbek scholar Abdulkhafiz Jalalov, Director of the I. Murninov Philosophy and Law Institute, Academy of Sciences, Republic

of Uzbekistan. The delegates were categorical in pointing out that the Afghan war of the 1980s, following the Soviet invasion, had been the single most important reason why the region is presently burdened with this menace. At the same time, the Central Asian delegates seemed confused about the way “democracy” is taking root in that region. They conveyed clearly that, while they welcomed the multi-party system, the same multi-party system is a hindrance in addressing many key issues.

A retired Indian Brigadier, Mulk Raj Anand, speaking on terrorism and violence, focussed on a different angle. He claimed, citing instances, that “a terrorist of today is not a patriot—no intellectual motivated by a cause.” The terrorist of today is a mercenary ready to kill for self-fulfillment and, hence, he pointed out, terrorism cannot be confined any longer within a geographical boundary. “It is like a virus that can go anywhere,” he said.

Growing threats of separatism

Although a number of participants did not agree with Brigadier Anand’s views, it is a fact that a large number of intruders who had crossed the Line of Control in Kashmir, and were identified as mujahideen, were indeed paid mercenaries and criminal elements from various Arab and Maghreb countries. Most of the fighting was done by the Pakistani Army regulars who had donned the mujahideen garb in order to mislead the media and give the appearance that the Pakistani Army was not directly involved in the infiltration. Incidentally, these mercenaries are still active in Kashmir, and those who have returned are only the Pakistani Army regulars, who were called back by Islamabad.

One Indian academic from Aligarh Muslim University, Prof. Mansura Haidar, pointed out that a similar proxy war is going on within Central Asia. This war, conducted by “mischief-makers, has been waged through the incitement of ethnic groups highlighting such issues as multi-lingualism.” She said that these “mischief-makers” are in the process of exploiting historical misunderstandings between the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, in the hope that these nations will indulge in full-fledged internal wars.

Prof. Xu Tao of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) pointed out that there is practically no difference between the Central Asian nations, China, India, and Russia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Russia and Central Asia have been plunged into severe economic problems. China is also encountering many problems that arose out of economic reforms. Under the circumstances, all the countries in the region require stability. He said that while this is the basic requirement, Islamic extremism has raised its ugly head, posing problems to all, including China and Russia. He said Wahhabism has been exported to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, but this form of sectarian Islam has also established its roots in China’s Xinjiang province. The situation has become more serious since the Kosovo crisis.

Now, separatism has been given a shot in the arm and is expected to spread, Professor Xu said.

Giving an overview of the geographical location and the bilateral relationships in the region, Prof. Yang Shu, Director of the Institute of Central Asian Studies of Lanzhou University in Lanzhou, China, said that the Central Asian nations have adopted a common foreign policy. The Western nations and Japan have little contact with these countries, but Central Asia had been Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. The weakening of Russia materially, however, has also weakened its influence over Central Asia.

China, another large neighbor, has maintained contacts with Central Asia for 2,000 years. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has made active efforts to enhance its relationship with the Central Asian nations. In 1996, China, Russia, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed an agreement to strengthen military trust and reduce military forces along the borders. This agreement has greatly contributed to, and guaranteed regional security. But the economic trade between China and Central Asia has not grown at a satisfactory rate. He said that the Second Eurasian Continental Bridge has not produced the desired effect. In 1998, trade across the Altai Mountains pass was only 2.63 million tons, and it is time that China, Central Asia, and other concerned countries increase their efforts to make more substantial, profitable use of the New Silk Road.

Professor Yang noted that as soon as the Central Asian nations had become independent in the early part of this decade, Islamic nations had begun to strengthen their already-existing links with these nations. Unfortunately, the Economic Cooperation Organization, formed in 1992 by Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and five newly independent Central Asian countries—Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—has not produced any marked effect.

Added threats

Broader strategic threats, due to the growing vulnerability of the Central Asian nations and weakening of Russia, were brought up on the second day by the Schiller Institute delegate, Michael Liebig. In his paper on “NATO, the Emerging ‘Eurasian Triangle’ and the Caucasus/Central Asia Region,” he pointed out that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s air war against Serbia was to demonstrate the following:

- Russia, internally exhausted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated so-called economic “reform” policies, no longer had a decisive say on the Balkans;
- China could no longer expect that it would be accepted, within the framework of the UN Security Council, as a global strategic partner;
- A strategically weakened continental western Europe, Germany and France, in particular, was “taught a lesson,” and the whole affair exhibited that western Europe lacked the political and military-strategic strength to oppose geopolitical

designs emanating from within the Anglo-American establishment.

- The air war, which brought economic and infrastructural destruction to Serbia, was also designed to close the gap between NATO in western-central Europe, and NATO member Turkey, which has special military ties with Israel. In other words, the Serbian invasion was also designed to establish a land corridor connecting the European Atlantic coast to the Caucasus/Central Asia region.

The last point, Liebig said, is not simply a geopolitical hypothesis. Former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, a geopolitician in the British mold, has described the Caucasus/Central Asian region in his book, *The Grand Chessboard*, as the “Eurasian Balkans,” indicative of the operational policy of the British-American-Commonwealth (BAC) power group. Liebig claimed that, in some areas of the Caucasus/Caspian Sea region, “indirect” politico-military intrusion of the United States, Turkey, Britain, and/or NATO is already occurring. Both Azerbaijan and Georgia, he pointed out, are calling for their republics to “join NATO,” “to establish U.S. or Turkish bases,” or “to bring in NATO or U.S. peace-keeping forces.” This is happening despite the fact that Russia has told the United States and its European NATO allies that any attempt by NATO to expand, and incorporate, directly or indirectly, any of the former Soviet republics, would constitute a “red line” not to be crossed. Liebig said, the word “any” includes the Baltic republics, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and the Caucasus republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

How will the U.S. define its role?

Liebig cautioned that neither NATO nor the United States can be viewed as monolithic entities, and that the core of the problem lies in how the United States will ultimately define its role as the world’s sole superpower. The new NATO strategy has been under intense discussion since January 1998. Threats to all the Central Asian countries will grow significantly if Washington caves in to the BAC power group within the establishment, which is pushing for a neo-imperial definition of America’s superpower role.

These developments, nonetheless, have now created concerns in the “Eurasian Triangle,” which consists of the region located between the apexes on which sit Russia, China, and India—three populous and powerful nations. Liebig warned that, if the new alliance takes the form of an “Euro-Atlantic” power bloc, which challenges the “Eurasian” bloc to a new Cold War, the situation will get out of hand. It is, therefore, of prime necessity that a “geopolitical counter-design” be activated.

The political-strategic and military cooperation in Eurasia among China, Russia, and India, needs a sound economic basis. Liebig pointed out that, in this context, the most important element is the economic development of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, or the New Silk Road, which the Schiller Insti-

tute and Lyndon LaRouche have been promoting since the early 1990s. The Eurasian Triangle will work best when it adopts the Eurasian Land-Bridge, which would provide the region a source for long-term economic benefits and regional stability.

The Eurasian Triangle must also act quickly, in the context of the manifold crises globally which are leading the present financial system to a massive and devastating collapse. None of the institutions, such as the IMF or the G-7 governments and their central banks, Liebig pointed out, have been able to restabilize the highly unstable financial system. He warned that the global financial-economic crisis has a dangerous strategic dynamic, in which there exists the possibility of the economic-financial crisis becoming a military-strategic crisis.

How China views the situation

Chinese foreign policy expert Prof. Ma Jiali of CICIR, in his paper “Geostrategic Situation in, and Big Powers’ Policies in Central Asia,” pointed out that he is certain that “relevant big powers will intensify their rivalry in the region, and, being poor and weak, the Central Asian countries could hardly resist foreign influences.”

Professor Ma said that while Russia will try to exercise its influence over Central Asia, the United States will also try its best to foster favorable sentiment. In order to deal with this situation, he suggested that the Central Asian nations should adopt an all-directional diplomacy. First, they must balance their policies toward Russia and the United States. Second, they must move quickly to develop good relations with all other countries.

Agreeing fully with Liebig’s analysis of events, Professor Ma noted that the United States began to focus more on Central Asia after realizing its strategic position in Europe this year. He said that the United States has always considered Central Asia to be a very important area, and, by making use of NATO expansion, the United States is making a bold attempt to move into Central Asia. This policy was helped by the growing “westward inclination” of the Central Asian nations.

Professor Ma made it clear that China will nonetheless maintain good relations with the Central Asian nations. The annual summit meeting among China, Russia, and the five Central Asian nations, which began in 1996 and has occurred every year since, has set the stage for achieving regional peace and stability. Professor Ma assured the audience that China will build its future relationship with the regional countries based on trust and mutual dependence. This will involve economic and trade cooperation in fields such as communications, transportation, and oil and gas exploration. At the same time, China and India have shown a common desire to weaken the influence of fundamentalism in the area, and this itself should form the basis for a common bond among the Central Asian nations, India, China, and Russia.