

Unilateralist U.S. Fuels China-India-Russia Ties

by Ramtanu Maitra

In December 1998, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov, while visiting India, proposed a trilateral axis against a U.S.-centered, unipolar world. It is evident that although almost four years have passed since, the idea is alive and gaining ground among the leaders of all three nations.

A number of unilateral actions of the Bush administration—including identifying Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil,” setting up military bases in Central Asia, mobilizing troops to invade Iraq unilaterally to change the present regime, and use of the “war against terrorism” selectively for securing geostrategic advantages—have, perhaps, helped to consolidate the idea further. What worries the three is that Washington is merely reacting to events and is seemingly incapable of providing leadership to improve either the economy, or security around the world.

At the time Primakov spoke, Washington had summarily shrugged off his proposal as an off-the-cuff statement of a leader representing a decaying nation. But, the steady growth of the Chinese and Indian economies, and Russia’s ability to address the world even when it seemed to be down and out, worried many in the United States.

For example, writing in the U.S. Army College quarterly *Parameters* last Winter, Julie Rahm wondered whether the China, India, Russia strategic triangle would lead to a new Cold War. She suggested measures to prevent the formation of such a strategic triangle, including building a multinational missile defense network; strengthening the U.S. military, with an effective national security posture in the Pacific; increasing intelligence gathering activities toward China, Russia, and India; pushing democratization of Russia and prevention of a Russia-China alliance; and to “explicitly and clearly support our friends who are engaged in fostering democracy and free markets.”

The Center for Defense Information’s Asia Forum had earlier published a monograph entitled “The Worrisome Russia-India-China Triangle,” by senior analyst Nicholas Berry, who came to a similar conclusion that such cooperation would be harmful to American interests. He recommended a “robust” national missile defense system that, he claimed, could add to the insecurity of Russia and China, and “even worry India because of the lingering U.S. ties to rival Pakistan.” Berry promoted the bill introduced by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher

(R-Calif.), which would prevent Moscow from re-scheduling debt owed to the United States until it stopped selling anti-ship Sunburn cruise missiles to China. The bill was passed on Oct. 3, 2000.

Pushing a Different ‘Triangle’

In October 2002, the National Bureau of Asian Research issued a 41-page analysis which did not talk about the China, India, Russia triangle, but instead suggested the “China-India-U.S. Triangle.” The author, John Garver, a professor of international relations at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology, is ostensibly an expert on issues which constitute the Sino-Indian rivalry. Making such conclusive statements as “Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi more frequently perceive each of their national interests as being adversely affected by an alignment of the other two against it,” Garver pointed out that Indian and Chinese concerns about the alignment of the other with the United States are far greater than U.S. concerns about a possible India-China alignment.

Summarily dismissing Russia’s capabilities in South Asia because of its geographical remoteness, Garver’s triangle turned out to be nothing more than containing China and playing on India’s alleged fears about China. Quoting the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) report issued by the U.S. Department of Defense on Sept. 30, 2001, Garver pointed out that the QDR list of America’s “enduring national interests” calls for precluding “hostile domination of critical areas,” including “the East Asian littoral,” a region defined as “stretching from south of Japan through Australia and into the Bay of Bengal.” In that region, “maintaining a stable balance would be particularly challenging,” according to the QDR, because “the possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will energize the region.” These elliptical formulations referred to an increasingly powerful China that might, someday, dominate the “East Asian littoral,” Garver wrote.

What emerges from Garver’s analysis, is that China will seek, from such triangular relations, U.S. support in its geopolitical rivalry with India in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. “Beijing will demand that the United States prove it is not ‘containing’ China by promoting India as paramount power in South Asia, or otherwise by appeasing New Delhi’s regional hegemonic ambitions,” Garver stated. Beijing will also point out to Washington, that not “containing” China will bring many benefits to the United States. Garver seems to believe that the triangular relationship will accrue benefits to U.S. corporations seeking contracts in China. China may even lobby through this mechanism “to prevent or limit transfer of U.S. military or dual-use technology to India.”

India, Garver says, has three primary interests in this triangle. The first is to prevent or abort Chinese-U.S. cooperation contrary to Indian policy objectives. In other words, India

wants to prevent U.S. support for a broader Chinese role in South Asia.

The other two Indian interests, Garver claims, are spin-offs of the first. One, is the seeming Indian interest to play on Washington's apprehension over China's growing power to secure U.S. support, or at least U.S. understanding, "for strengthening India's pre-eminent position in the South Asia-Indian Ocean region via transfers of advanced military technologies, training in modern modes of warfare, and so on." India's third interest is to play on Chinese fears of Indian participation in the U.S.-inspired "anti-China" schemes, to make Beijing more understanding of Indian objections to Chinese activities in the South Asia-Indian Ocean region, Garver wrote.

Because China and India supposedly each want to eliminate its fear about the other by getting close to the United States, what the United States gets out of the triangular relations is not clear from Garver's analysis. He takes a jab by claiming that "some of those [U.S.] interests are related to the creation of a structure of power in Asia that will constrain an increasingly powerful and assertive China. . . . As China's power continues to grow in the coming decades the problem for Washington will be how to induce Beijing not to embark on a course of hegemony, territorial expansion, or confrontation with the United States in Asia." In other words, the triangle concept, as spun out by Garver, centers on an eventual U.S. containment of China.

Lingering Concerns

What is evident from Garver's analyses, is that there exists a genuine concern at every level among policymakers in Washington about a potential cooperative relationship among China, India, and Russia. Because these analysts cannot conceive of the United States sharing powers and responsibilities of the world with other major nations; nor can they even think beyond playing the role of a sole superpower—however weak that power may be; their observations are centered on how not to allow China, India, and Russia to play a constructive role.

However, it is evident that although the three are far from settling on an agenda which would define the fine points of such cooperation, or proposing a timetable when such cooperation will become official, there are many indications that they are engaged in finding areas of agreement.

Initially, Beijing was reticent about the cooperative triangle, but in January 2001, during Chinese leader Li Peng's visit to India, Beijing made clear to New Delhi that China might no longer be averse to building greater political cooperation among the three.

In February 2002, when the Chinese premier Zhu Rongji visited New Delhi, both the Chinese and Indian leaders shared concerns about controlling international terrorism and said publicly that a multipolar international system is preferred to counter the growing U.S. influence and the role of NATO

after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was also said by both the Chinese and Indian leaders that the multipolar system will succeed only if the complementary poles pursue political and strategic policies that are not at variance, and that *all* partners in a strategic relationship must abide by the basic tenets of multilateralism.

Similar signals also came from Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, who was in New Delhi in February 2002, called for a closer cooperation among the three. He indicated that there is a new sense of urgency for triangular cooperation, which is shared by Beijing. Before Ivanov left New Delhi, the Indian External Affairs Ministry signaled that India was willing to work "slowly and steadily" toward the goal of triangular cooperation.

Future Dialog

It is expected that the triangular cooperation will be discussed in detail in coming months. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will be in New Delhi in December along with a large contingent of economists, scientists, and military personnel. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will be visiting Beijing soon, probably early next year. Beijing, as a build-up for the Indian prime minister's visit, for the first time threw open the gates of Potala, in Lhasa, to Indian journalists some weeks ago.

Beyond the high-profile trips, undercurrents of the relationship are flourishing. Visits by delegations at the state and provincial levels and exchange of academics among the three countries have grown at a steady rate, and these delegations have succeeded in bringing to the fore areas where cooperation would be essential for preserving their economic growth and maintenance of regional security. The opening of the gates of Potala Palace, and a suggestion to open a bus route from the Indian state of Sikkim to Lhasa, cannot be ignored as tokenism, but are gestures of growing trust and confidence.

It is certain that the triangular cooperation among China, India, and Russia will advance in the coming months. However, the cooperation will not be against the United States, but to share responsibilities for Eurasia, and beyond—along with the United States, the European Union, and other major nations of the world. The reason that such advances will occur is not only because the three nations can contribute significantly to each other's economic, scientific, and technological well-being and security, but because of Washington's glaring weaknesses in managing world affairs. Washington's reticence to reinvigorate its physical economy; to discuss with nations the need for a new international monetary system, which would abandon the free market system, the darling of the colonial powers in the 19th and 20th Centuries; and its propensity to cling to the geopolitics of conflict and division, thus undermining the sovereignty of other nations, could be the greatest instigation for the three to cooperate purposefully.