



The Sochi Summit: Fresh Moves on The Grand Eurasian Chessboard

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Summary

At their second Summit in Sochi on August 18, 2010, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan agreed to reinforce their cooperation. Russia wishes to re-establish its presence in Afghanistan and in Central Asia, with President Medvedev harking back to the Soviet era. Russia also wishes to explore transit options via Afghanistan and Tajikistan to Pakistan. China's growing influence in the region, and security issues pertaining to Afghanistan/Pakistan - explains the Russian outreach. The United States has supported the Russian initiative due to its own compulsions and the China factor. India needs to pursue a well considered "Eurasian Heartland" policy in the context of these developments.

Introduction

1. At their Second Quadrilateral Summit in Sochi on August 18, 2010, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan agreed to reinforce their economic and security cooperation in the region¹. For Russia, this move could help it to re-establish its presence in Afghanistan and in Central Asia, with President Medvedev referring to the need to revive Soviet-era projects in the country. It could also help it to explore transit options via Afghanistan and Tajikistan to Pakistan. China's growing influence in the region, and security issues pertaining to Afghanistan/Pakistan - explains the Russian outreach, which included a call to international financial institutions to fund the Quartet's joint projects in transport, communications and energy networks - to match China's financial clout.

2. Interestingly, the United States was reported to have welcomed Russia's greater involvement in Afghanistan through the Quartet. The US position may be seen in the context of the general 'reset' between Russia and the United States, a reversal from the Russia-containment strategies urged by the Neoconservatives in earlier American Administrations. The 'reset' itself is a complicated affair, particularly in Europe, due to the legacy of the Cold War. But the prospect of a Eurasia dominated exclusively by China has tempered the traditional American caution in seeking Russian cooperation in Central Asia, recently exemplified in the restrained manner with which both parties reacted to the Kyrgyz crisis. Indeed, a host of brilliant American strategic thinkers have traditionally warned against the rise of a regional hegemon in the Eurasian hemisphere. Halford Mackinder, the original British geo-strategist, had said at the turn of the 20th century - that he who dominates the Eurasian heartland, dominates the world.

3. India's geographic position overlooking the southern hemisphere's waters bestows on it great value as a strategic partner, a fact not lost on either the United States or China. At the same time, both India and Russia have to ensure that they do not perceive each other's relationships with other countries as a zero sum game. Thus India should keep the big picture in mind while monitoring developments in Pakistan-Russia relations and continue to strengthen its friendship with Russia. Russia is unlikely to succeed in its attempts to involve Pakistan in stabilising Afghanistan, since the ruling establishments in Pakistan thrive on perpetuating Afghanistan's endless descent into chaos. And why should they - Pakistan's geo-strategic utility and with it external funding inflows - which have rescued the country from bankruptcy time and again- increases exponentially during times of Afghan anarchy (post 1979 and post 2001). India could thus consider a proactive Eurasian "Heartland" policy along-with its "Look East, West and South" policies and position itself to avail of the virtuous cycles resulting from better communications networks being built in the region - while also making attempts to work together with Russia and

¹ The last Quadrilateral Summit was held in Dushanbe on July 30, 2009 and the next one is also scheduled there.

China, including in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). A robust dialogue with the US will ensure that these initiatives do not impact strengthening Indo-US relations, as both countries are aware that they are pursuing their national interest.

The Sochi Summit Joint Statement

4. The Joint Statement issued by the Quad recognised the importance of regional cooperation in ensuring regional stability and economic development -by inter alia taking united action to combat drug trafficking and terrorism; improving the business/ investment environment; establishing direct contacts between their business communities; restoring key areas of the Afghan economy, and identifying joint projects including in energy and transport infrastructure - such as the Central Asia - South Asia (Casa 1000) project for a power transmission line from Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, with Russia's participation. *Tellingly, President Medvedev called for the revival of cooperation dating back to the Soviet era*². The Joint Statement called on international financial institutions "to step up assistance in implementing regional economic projects". It highlighted the importance of the SCO's³ involvement in anti-terrorism, counter-narcotics and combating organised crime, and of the CSTO⁴ in anti-drug trafficking activities.

5. The Joint Statement additionally welcomed the Pak-Af trade and transit agreement, which has great significance for the other members. Separately, **Russia and Pakistan were reported to be looking at existing opportunities for cooperation in the rail transit and energy sectors, which could open a route from Russia to the legendary "warm waters" - through Tajikistan and Afghanistan**⁵. But the Joint Statement maintained a coy silence on the recently unveiled "stunning" find of US\$ 1 trillion worth of mineral deposits in Afghanistan.

6. The above proposals could be juxtaposed with Chinese initiatives to build rail and road transport corridors knitting Central Asia, POK and Afghanistan in a grid connected with China's western region.

² Russia Today carried a direct quote on this issue on its website, citing Interfax: "We have projects that were historically developing in our region and projects that appeared in the Soviet time. I believe it would make sense if we revert to them in order to add dynamics to economic development and solve a whole range of urgent problems, including in the fields of energy and social development" - <http://rt.com/Politics/2010-08-18/sochi-summit-leaders-medvedev.html>.

³ SCO Members: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan; Observer States: India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan; Dialogue Partners: Belarus, Sri Lanka.

⁴ RCollective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) Members: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

⁵ <http://orientalreview.org/2010/08/23/russia-and-pakistan-after-the-sochi-fourlateral-summit/>

Bilateral Meeting: Pakistan- Russia

7. At their bilateral meeting, President Medvedev and President Zardari reviewed the strengthening of bilateral trade, business and economic ties, and examined the possibility of joint projects in the fuel, energy, rail transport and metals sectors⁶. While lauding the frequency of contacts and existing cooperation on counterterrorism and related issues, Pres. Medvedev reiterated the importance of economic cooperation - both in the bilateral and in the 4-Party format. The Russian-Pakistani Intergovernmental Commission would be holding its first meeting on September 21, 2010. Extending condolences, the President promised assistance to Pakistan in dealing with the flood situation with Russia already having sent significant amounts of air and emergency relief. President Zardari noted that this was their fourth meeting and observed that this was a first for Pakistan-Russia relations. He invited Pres. Medvedev to visit Pakistan, adding "I myself have never seen Moscow. I would love to come to Moscow, too"⁷. He also stated: "Our neighbours should understand that creating negativity will eventually fall back on negativity. It's time that we produce productivity throughout".

8. Russian Pakistani contacts have increased over the years. In June 2009 Pakistan Army Chief Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani met the Russian leadership and his counterpart, during which he met his Russian counterpart a follow up of the previous week's bilaterals on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Yekaterinburg. "The possibility of defence cooperation was bound to have been raised, with Interfax quoting a Russian Army spokesman in this regard. Clearly Russia has accepted the line that Pakistan has to be included in any discussion on addressing the situation in Afghanistan and the serious problems created by rampant drug trafficking, terrorism and crime. Pakistan is also important for plans to build transit transport and energy corridors to the seas.

The United States

9. Itar-Tass reported that Philip J. Crowley, Assistant Secretary of State, United States had welcomed Russia's cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Russia could play an important role, as the US could not meet Afghanistan and Pakistan's needs on its own⁸. In June, President Barack Obama and President Medvedev had announced that they were "working on the possibility of assisting Afghan security forces by supplying Russian-made helicopters and spare parts." The *Wall Street Journal*, not normally very pro-Russian, carried favourable commentary on American willingness to permit NATO

⁶ <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/793>.

⁷ Prior to the meeting Sergei Prikhodko, aide to the Russian president, had said: "We're hoping that the Sochi meeting will give an impulse to the preparation of a full-scale visit by the Pakistani leader to Moscow".

⁸ <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=15416420&PageNum=1>, dated 19.08.2010.

funding for Russian Mi-17 helicopters for Afghanistan, which had become possible after US sanctions on Rosboronexport, Russia's state arms export company were lifted (the US military has been buying Russian helicopters for Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan).

10. The 'reset' following the easing of tensions with Russia over BMD deployments in Europe, and other gestures – clearly had opened up some options for US-Russian understanding on issues in the Central Asian theatre and elsewhere.

The Elephant in Every Room

11. An additional factor weighing on both the US and Russia – was China's growing presence and strengthening ties with countries in the region. China is funding/ building a rail and road network in POK Afghanistan and Tajikistan (apart from other countries); building trans-Asian pipelines and transportation networks; linking up its relatively less developed western provinces to Central Asia and beyond; upgrading its railroad centre near Urumqi; developing high-speed rail, cutting distances and time between its coastal areas and the hinterland; discussing plans to connect Afghanistan's rail system with China's through Tajikistan, and also with Iran, Pakistan and other Central Asian countries, and upgrading railroad infrastructure in Kazakhstan and road infrastructure near the Wakhan Corridor, near the border between Afghanistan and China⁹. China has invested over \$3 billion in the Aynak copper field in Afghanistan and undertaken to construct supporting infrastructure. Some of China's projects in Pakistan have been stalled due to unrest in Baluchistan and the Pashtun areas, but once the situation stabilizes, the grid will effectively connect these economies.

12. China is also coordinating these programmes with regional and trans-regional networks funded by the ADB and the EU, which lack both funds and "the ability to pursue an integrated strategy managed by a single overarching authority"¹⁰. Also according to Richard Weitz¹¹ "The PRC government can design and fund rail networks, including subsidizing the purchase of Chinese-made rail equipment by foreign countries, though these projects are naturally optimized to serve Beijing's economic interests. China's Eurasian railroad building campaign also helps overcome another potential barrier... the legacy of the formerly integrated Soviet economy in Eurasia... major roads, railways and energy pipelines in the new states of Central Asia all flowed northward towards Russia... The PRC has been funding several major infrastructure projects to spur east-west traffic...".

⁹ Russell Hsiao, Glen E. Howard "China Builds Closer Ties to Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor". China Brief Volume: 10 Issue: 1 January 7, 2010 Category: China Brief, In a Fortnight, Home Page, Military/Security, China and the Asia-Pacific, Afghanistan, South Asia

¹⁰ Richard Weitz: "Afghanistan in China's Emerging Eurasian Transport Corridor". China Brief Volume: 10 Issue: 14 July 9, 2010.

¹¹ Ibid.

13. Herein lies the potential for rivalry with Russia.
14. Further inroads would consolidate China's growing advantage in Central Asia and increasing control over its resources. Xinhua was however quick to point out that the United States could equally be accused of coveting the newly found mineral wealth in Afghanistan, while the NYT mentioned US apprehensions that "resource-hungry" China could try "to dominate the development of Afghanistan's mineral wealth".
15. *China's initiatives are partly aimed at reducing its dependence on sea-routed energy supplies, as the energy security achieved on the back of imports from Russia and Central Asia – in a sense the classical "Heartland" – could enable China to curtail its dealings in petro-dollars and eventually reduce its umbilical dependence on the US economy. China is additionally actively pursuing the option of internationalizing its currency and using it for settling bilateral transactions with a wide range of countries, which means at least part of its trade will no longer be denominated in dollars, the existing international reserve currency. China's domination of Central Asia could thus be a key factor to its achieving relative strategic autonomy from the United States [a positively disposed Russia was key to China's strategy, particularly in the initial stages, and thus China had taken the lead in establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which included Russia].*

A Clear Geopolitical shift

16. Historically, Eurasia was an area of active geopolitical competition, evidenced by the Great Game and the Cold War. After the discovery of large oil and gas fields in the region, the older quest for power/ideological/territorial domination shifted to a competition for energy and other resources. The United States encouraged East to West energy flows, such as the TAPI pipeline, bypassing territories under Russian control, while ignoring the India-Pakistan-Iran (IPI) route. An exception is a reference in an Atlantic Council Report which recommended the U.S. support the IPI¹². But while Russia/the Soviet Union was the target of containment strategies deployed in Eurasia by the United States in the 20th century, China's rise may have changed that.
17. In this context it is worth recalling the British geo-strategist Halford Mackinder's words in 1904 – that he who ruled the Eurasian "Heartland"¹³ by extension controlled the world. Mackinder's views provoked controversy, but Henry Kissinger seemed to validate parts of his 'Heartland' theory when he wrote in *Diplomacy* that "The domination of a

¹² "Needed: A Comprehensive U.S. Policy Towards Pakistan, A Report by the Atlantic Council"; Honorary Co-Chairs: Senator Chuck Hagel • Senator John Kerry stated - "The U.S. should look favorably at the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline once the new administration has sorted out its policies for Iran. The U.S. should also support the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan- Pakistan-India pipeline".

¹³ Interior Asia and Eastern Europe.

single power of either of Eurasia's two principal spheres –Europe or Asia- remains a good definition of strategic danger for America...". Prof. John Mearsheimer also lucidly enunciated the geopolitical imperatives underlying American policy -: "States that achieve regional hegemony ... seek to prevent great powers in other geographical regions from duplicating their feat. ... the United States ...has made sure that no other great power dominated either Asia or Europe the way it dominates the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴"

18. At the same time, China has assiduously resisted calls for it to share the security burden in these troubled regions. As Robert D. Kaplan has observed, "Meanwhile, other rising and resurgent powers wait patiently in the wings, free-riding on the public good we offer. This is exactly how an empire declines, by allowing others to take advantage of its own exertions¹⁵.

Conclusion

19. India is positioned at the centre of 3 regions: Central Asia, South and South East Asia, and "neighboured" by the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. This position gives it an excellent vantage point and bestows on it great value as a strategic partner, a fact not lost on either the United States or China. It is in both the US' and China's overall interest to draw India into a closer relationship and an either/or dilemma must be avoided. Russia could be a key partner in this process, perhaps in the SCO framework.

20. While in recent months India has pursued an active Look East, Look South (Seaward ho!) and Look West policy, India now needs to move beyond the (psychological?) Himalayan barrier and energise its relations with other Asian powers, which means South-West Asia, Russia, China and the Central Asian States. The world continues to buy into Pakistan's



(Source : Bharat Rakshak Forum Discussions.)

¹⁴ Professor John Mearsheimer: "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia"- Fourth Annual Michael Hintze Lecture in International Security, Wednesday 4th August 2010.

¹⁵ ROBERT D. KAPLAN: "Beijing's Afghan Gamble The New York Times, October 7, 2009.

“Exclude India-stabilise Afghanistan” litany, so India just has to deal with this as best it can.

21. It is very important to strengthen India’s traditional friendship with Russia. Russia’s relations with Pakistan need not be perceived as a zero sum game, with the same applying to India’s relations with other powers. India’s National Security Adviser paid a visit to Russia ahead of the Sochi Summit and held consultations on a wide range of issues¹⁶. It is important for India to remain briefed on developments in Russian-Pakistani relations. *Foreign Policy* has published 10 reasons why Russia will continue to be important in the 21st century¹⁷. One area in which there is tremendous potential is in industrial R & D. India should participate in Russia’ proposed new Silicon Valley R & D initiative and create similar R & D parks with Russian collaboration here.

22. The CII’s recent visit to China to explore opening up Chinese markets for our products - so that the bilateral relationship is not dominated by commodity exports from India - is a step in the right direction. So are other proposals made to re-energise cooperation with Central Asia and Iran by the Foreign Secretary at IDSA¹⁸. If this scenario prevails, India can then consider out of the box ideas regarding connectivity with China and the CARs for accessing the markets, energy and water resources of the latter, as well as bilateral initiatives in other sectors.

23. In conclusion, to help India optimize its choices in a complex geopolitical environment, India should focus on participating in the virtuous cycles being generated by increased economic activity in the region and take forward existing proposals on bilateral and regional cooperation, in short, refine its own policy towards the “heartland”. This is not in contradiction to India’s engagement with the littoral States along the Asian maritime highways, since India is both a land and a maritime power. A robust dialogue with the US will ensure that these initiatives do not impact strengthening Indo-US relations as both countries are aware that they are pursuing their national interest.

The views expressed here are personal

¹⁶ <http://www.asianage.com/india/shivshankar-menon-pays-visit-russia-544>

¹⁷ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/18/why_Russia_matters?page=full

¹⁸ http://www.idsa.in/KeynoteAddressIndiaandIrananenduringrelationship_nirupamaroy.