

Russo-Chinese Pact in The Aftermath of Soviet Dis-integration in Central Asia & It's Implications For India

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The march of Shanghai Five¹ started in 1996 by Russia, China and the three bordering post-Soviet Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which afterwards turned into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the year of 2001 on June 15th with the inclusion of the 4th former Soviet Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan into the organization, provides the formal structure of Sino-Russian strategic partnership in Central Asia. It began with confidence building measures (CBMs) on the border and subsequently included other fields of cooperation.

India and Russia regard Central Asia and Afghanistan as areas of common concern. The fact that Sino-Russian and Central Asian rapprochement and boundary settlements have been accompanied by peace and tranquility agreements and CBMs in the border areas between India and China as well. According to Dr. Tatyana Shaumyan, the head of the Centre for Indian Studies at the Russian Institute of Oriental Studies², "India has wanted to join the organization almost since its inception, and it has held observer status, but as soon as full-fledged membership was brought up for India, Pakistan was also immediately engaged. In this situation, Russia was ready to support India's bid for membership and China more likely expressed interest in Pakistan. In the end, it was decided to accept both countries." The British rulers of India participated in the "great game" over Central Asia and Afghanistan in the last century with a view to consolidating their hold on their prized Indian possession, but they abstained from seeking direct possession. By mutual consent through the Anglo-Russian treaty of 1907, Afghanistan was turned into a buffer state between Tsarist Russia and British India.

However Central Asia in the recent past came to be divided between the Russian/Soviet and the Chinese state systems or "empires"³. Tibet and eastern Turkestan or the Xinjiang region came under Chinese possession and western Turkestan (comprising the present Central Asian Republics) became a part of the Tsarist Russian Empire and subsequently of the Soviet Union. Inner Mongolia became a part of China and the Mongolian People's Republic gravitated towards the Soviet bloc. The developments in Central Asia have always impacted on India, and India and Central Asia have maintained contacts since times immemorial.

The weak Chinese Empire in the 19th century sought to play on the contradictions of various imperialist powers and maintained a nominal sovereignty, even as it was divided into spheres of influence of various European powers. Envisaging a greater challenge from the more dominant and expanding Russian Empire, the British rulers of India tended to uphold the Chinese claims to sovereignty over Central Asian regions over which imperial Chinese hold was just nominal. Naturally there is little doubt that the developments in Sino-Russian relations in general and their partnership or otherwise in Central Asia hold considerable importance for India and its overall geopolitical interests in the region.

¹ People's Daily, July 6th 2000

² IndRus, October 10th 2013

³ March of Central Asia by Ram Rahul, Indus Publishing Company, March 1st 2002

However in the aftermath of India's independence from the clutch of the British rule the situation changed dramatically specially after the border disputes between India and China and now the latter's policy of developing its western areas and Russia's policy of promoting regional integration through the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) and collective security treaty, aim at strengthening positions in their respective parts of Central Asia. China is utilizing the Shanghai Forum for curbing Uighur separatism, promoting the "one China" concept and getting access to the hydro-carbons of Central Asia and Russia. It is not directly questioning Russia's traditional role, but is trying to fill up available spaces that include increasing military contacts. But contrary to that it appears that without directly questioning Russia's traditional role in Central Asia, China is persistently making inroads⁴ in the region by filling up available spaces. Significantly, China is also seeking to establish military contacts with the Central Asian states. Reports of growing military exchanges between China and the CARs and offers of military assistance by the former to the latter are also appearing of late. The Chinese military delegations are visiting the CARs. The Turkmen defense minister visited China in September 1999 and expressed interest in cooperation with China in the field of military training and use of equipment. China extended aid of 11 million yuan to the Kazakh armed forces during the visit of the Kazakh defence minister to China in April-end 2000. On July 13, 2000, a Chinese military delegation visited Tajikistan. On July 23, 1999, the visiting Chinese military delegation pledged aid to Kazakhstan. Of late, China has also enhanced its military ties with Uzbekistan, where the government under President Islam Karimov is carrying on a determined struggle against Islamic militancy and extremism. China's policy towards Central Asia is determined by its desire to have a belt of good-neighbourly states on its sensitive western borders across Xinjiang, where it is facing the problem of Uighur separatism. Uighurs constitute 8 million of the 17 million population of Xinjiang. China is keen to ensure that the newly independent Central Asian states do not give any support and encouragement to the Uighurs in Xinjiang.

The beginning of the Shanghai Five process coincided with the change of the stewardship of the Russian Foreign Ministry. In January 1996, Andrei Kozyrev was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov. Although disenchantment with the totally Westward orientation and a certain shift in the country's policy had begun much earlier in 1993-94, still Kozyrev bore the tag of being pro-West. Primakov laid greater stress on a more balanced policy between the West and the East and is associated with the concept of pursuing a "multipolar" world order. And Russia switched over to Eurasianism from much hyped and expected Atlanticism⁵. It is of late Russia has realized that it can never occupy a predominant position in her central Asian backyard in the post-Soviet era without the China's backing. And China took Russia's sides in its criticism of NATO's eastward march. So first thing they (Soviet Union/Russia and China) did was to solve their border disputes with the process of starting by the Soviet-Chinese border agreement in the eastern section was signed on May 16, 1991, and the Sino-Russian agreement on the western sector of the border on September 3, 1994.

The example set by Russia and China was followed by other Central Asian states. Presidents Nazarbayev, Karimov, Akayev, Niyazov, and Rahmonov from the Central Asian countries all visited China and documents defining good neighbourly relationships between each of these countries and China were signed. In 1994, Premier Li Peng of China paid an official visit to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Premier Li Peng sought to assure the Central Asian leaders that China would forever be a good friend of the Central Asian countries, and that it would not pursue a sphere of influence in Central Asia, political or economic. China offered the landlocked Central Asian states an outlet to the sea on its Pacific coast.

⁴The Influence of China and Russia in Central Asia by Stephen Blank, NBR, April 9th 2013

⁵Post-Cold War Sino-Russian Relations: An Indian Perspective by Jyotsna Bakshi, January 8th 2002

Immediately after the emergence of independent states in Central Asia, the Chinese quickly established rail and road links with the bordering CARs. Cheap Chinese consumer goods flooded the region. China has also extended access to the sea to the land-locked Central Asian states through its ports on the Pacific Ocean. Traditionally, all transport and communications links of Central Asia have been through Russia. Access to the sea across the Chinese territory helps the CARs in their search for alternative routes and in that measure reduces their dependence on Moscow. The revival of the ancient Silk Road network linking China across Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East has caught the imagination of all concerned. Moscow is keen to ensure that Russia is not bypassed in the transport and pipeline building activities in the region⁶. It would like to be connected with them. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia is keenly projecting itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia through the transport network across Russian territory. It has enthusiastically supported the route from China across Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus to Poland as the northern branch of the "Silk Road".

So India certainly cannot count on her Russian support since Russia cannot chart her course in central Asia without active Chinese participations. In fact after US pullout from Afghanistan India will lose much of her influence which presently wielding over the central Asian landmass. With US presence in central Asia India will certainly have a larger voice over there as it will be under the Sino-Russian dominance. As unlike Russia, China sees India as not just an obstacle in its own right, but as a U.S. stalking horse and continues to obstruct Indian efforts to enhance its presence in Central Asia. As we approach 2014 it seems clear that in the absence of the U.S. role (and despite Russian support), China and Pakistan will probably succeed in checking India's ability to project meaningful economic or military power into the region, including its ability to negotiate contracts for energy supplies. And what argument basically China putting forward in order delay or obstruct other ways India's entry to the SCO was that under the SCO charter, member states should not have unresolved conflicts among themselves, and Pakistan and India been unable to resolve the Kashmir issue for decades. It was this issue that was discussed at the first meeting of the new Pakistani prime minister with his Indian counterpart recently in New York. Not only that India is also a long drawn and unresolved border disputes with China. So it is quite clear that with the inclusion of both India and Pakistan in the SCO the organization will transform into a global organization from rather than a regional force. But at the same time with the inclusion of these two South Asian giants SCO will lose its cohesiveness as India is having border and territorial disputes with both China and Pakistan as it was suggested before as SCO could turn into a political union, but under the new situation that could surely be problem as expected.

The only hope which has been showing up is that Russia can work here as a regional regulator in the triangle of these three very important Asian siblings – China, India and Pakistan as the basic concern of SCO is the security of Asia as India and China are Russia's strategic partners, as well as important military partners. It is in the interest of Russia to make sure that the SCO can become a platform for these three major powers.

⁶ibid

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