



## **Policy Brief**

### **India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Hallmark of Enduring Credibility**

- *Dr Vijay Sakhuja*

After his landmark visit to the U.S., Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is now programmed to visit Russia, December 6-8, 2009 for the annual Indo-Russian summit. These visits are significant keeping in mind that both Russia and the U.S. are India's strategic partners; the India-Russia relationship has been termed as "time tested" while the India-U.S. relationship has been referred to as "the defining one for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century".

These back to back visits also come at a time when India has gained ascendancy in the global power equation, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is heading a stable government in its second term thus making him a more confident leader. Furthermore, the Indian economy is now showing good signs of recovery (GDP growth rate of 7.9 percent during the July-September quarter) after a year of global financial crisis that continues to impact some of the major economies of the world.

Under the strategic partnership, high level visits between India and Russia are a regular feature. In December 2008, President Dmitri Medvedev visited India and both sides had reaffirmed their strategic partnership. They agreed to be guided by the (a) Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation of January 28, 1993, and (b) the Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation of October 3, 2000. During the visit, the two sides also signed ten Agreements/MoUs spanning a wide spectrum of issues including trade, science and technology, nuclear and military cooperation, terrorism, joint

space programmes, and customs, excise and narcotics signifying that both partners are committed to taking their relationship to a higher level as also to explore new vistas of cooperation including knowledge-based economic projects. Significantly, President Dmitri Medvedev's visit to India in December 2008 took place at a time when India was still reeling under the shock of the Mumbai terror attacks on 26 November and New Delhi did not defer the visit.

Today, New Delhi and Moscow share a broad convergence of interests and have common perspectives on a variety of global issues. Further, both sides have expressed their commitment to consolidate their strategic partnership. New Delhi acknowledges Moscow's support in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group's (NSG) deliberations, which paved the way for access to key nuclear technologies, construction of new nuclear reactors and supply of nuclear fuel, thus supporting India's case for civil nuclear technology transfer to meet its critical energy needs. In 2008, during his visit to New Delhi, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed a deal to build four nuclear power plants in India.

The military-technological cooperation remains the bedrock of their bilateral relations with big ticket purchases made from Russia in the past including aircraft carrier (INS Vikramaditya/Gorshkov), stealth frigates (Krivak III/Talwar class), modern fighters (Su 27 / Su 30 MKI), and military helicopters (MI series), variety of army equipment (tanks, artillery pieces, APCs, etc) and also joint development of Brahmos a cruise missiles. The two sides have also announced the development of the hypersonic version of Brahmos by 2015. India and Russia also remain committed to enhancing bilateral trade currently pegged at US \$7 billion to US \$20 billion by 2015.

These strategic transactions between India and Russia are not only because of their long-established relationship, but are also driven by a number of factors that are global in nature and have the potential to adversely impact on both regional and international security.

### **Situation in Afghanistan-Pakistan**

The situation in Afghanistan-Pakistan would obviously be a main agenda item for consultations and discussions between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Dmitri Medvedev. Stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan is critical for both India and Russia and this can be best achieved through political support to the democratically

elected government in Kabul. It requires assistance to rebuild the country, recreate infrastructure damaged/destroyed over decades of war fighting, help for developing democratic institutions, provide security to its citizens through development, and above all a capacity to fight terrorism emanating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders. The Russian initiative to host a conference under the SCO on Afghanistan in March 2009 at Moscow was indeed noteworthy. Perhaps what is more worrying is the nexus between state forces (Pakistani intelligence agencies) and the terrorist groups (Taliban and Al Qaeda) that has undermined the ongoing military action against terrorist groups. The U.S. President Barack Obama has recently announced that the U.S. is planning to deploy additional 30,000 troops (existing force level of 68,000 US troops and 38,000 combined NATO forces) in Afghanistan by 2010. This heavy concentration of force is reminiscent of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s when nearly 100,000 Soviet troops were deployed. There are also fears that the protracted war on terror currently in its ninth year, in the Afghanistan-Pakistan area could spill over to Russia and India.

### **Iran's Nuclear Ambitions**

Iran's nuclear ambition and the unabated tensions between Washington and Tehran are of major concern to India and Russia. It is important that both New Delhi and Moscow take a principled position as envisaged under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. India has reiterated its concerns over the Iranian nuclear programme, and has for the third time voted in the IAEA against Iran's alleged clandestine nuclear weapons programme. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has categorically stated that "As far as Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions are concerned, I have stated it unambiguously on several occasions that we do not support the nuclear weapon ambitions of Iran. Iran is a signatory to the NPT." Russia too has voted (November 27, 2009) in favour of a resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) censuring Iran and urging Tehran to stop work on the second uranium enrichment plant near Qom. Grigory Berdennikov, Russia's IAEA ambassador has observed that, "The Russian delegation supports the draft resolution by the Board of Governors that was presented by Germany, with regard to the implementation of a safeguards agreement, linked to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, as well as the relevant provisions of UN Security Council resolutions on Iran."

### **Proliferation of WMDs**

The shocking revelations of A. Q. Khan's proliferation network and the well established China-Pakistan nuclear and missile conundrum are key issues of concern for India. Further, there are fears that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is physically unsafe and can be targeted by Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups who could use it with catastrophic impact. This is perhaps an important reason why Russia should genuinely understand India's sensitivities about China-Pakistan nuclear and military cooperation and must impress upon China against proliferation. Russia is favourably positioned to play an important role given that it is a major source of supply of advanced missile technology to China. Further, both New Delhi and Moscow should explore bilateral and multilateral approaches to curb WMD proliferation among states and as also to non-state actors.

### **Terrorism**

India and Russia have encountered international terrorism long before 9/11 and have adopted proactive strategies to counter terrorism. Both partners believe that to ward off the threat of international terrorism the global community must strive for cooperative strategies and help each other to defeat this evil. Besides, state actions must be based on the Charter of the United Nations and international law. Further, there is a need for broadening of cooperation to suppress activity of terrorist across the globe through a robust international cooperative mechanism to fight transnational crimes.

### **Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) and Russia- India-China (RIC)**

India and Russia are members of the BRIC forum which provides their leaders a platform to coordinate and cooperate on issues of politics, economics, and energy and food security. The grouping also envisages cooperation in science & technology and education. At another level, the trilateral Russia-India-China (RIC), is another important forum for discussions on trade and business, and also encourage political exchange on regional and international issues such as climate change and the current global financial crisis. The ninth trilateral meeting of the Foreign Ministers of RIC grouping was held in Bangalore in October 2009. The joint declaration had focused on collaboration to consolidate the structure for a greater role in world affairs. In the above groupings, besides India and Russia, China is a common partner and an acknowledged rising power that can play a pivotal role in deliberations, as also provide sinews for the grouping. At the bilateral level, India-China relationship has witnessed an upward trajectory pivoting on bilateral trade currently pegged at over U.S. \$ 50 billion; however there are

contentious issues, particularly the boundary dispute along the Himalayas that may result in major tensions in their relationship. Yet, this multilateral arrangement has the potential to keep the economic dialogue going and can also serve as a platform for bilateral discussions on the sidelines of the BRIC and RIC deliberations similar to the meeting between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Premier Wen Jiabao in Thailand in October 2009 on the sidelines of the Indo-ASEAN summit.

### **India US Strategic Partnership**

Finally, the reverberations from India-US strategic partnership that is making great strides across a wide spectrum of issues including nuclear, military, science & technology, are sure to be felt in Moscow. It is important for both partners to value each other's strategic interests and root out any discordant notes that could impinge on their bilateral relationship. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Dmitri Medvedev have an important opportunity to convey to the international community that both sides respect each other's national interests and would work together to consolidate their bilateral relationship and make it more meaningful and credible.

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*December 4, 2009*