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Russia-India ties sour in Central Asia

By Peter Lee
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Unsound strategy, mutual mistrust and opportunism are combining to frustrate the efforts of Moscow and India to blunt China's soft-power push into Russia's "near beyond" - the oil and gas-rich former Soviet republics that line the path of the ancient Silk Road from the Caspian Sea to China's doorstep at Xinjiang province.

Russia's unwelcome efforts to cobble together a Central Asian security bloc and claim a central role in a new, multi-polar Euroasian security structure have been the main stumbling block to advancement of its interests in the region.

It has not received a lot of help from India's opportunistic decision to play the "Great Game" on the cheap - piggybacking the military and diplomatic presence of Moscow and Washington in selected pro-Russian and pro-Western states in Central Asia to score points off its rivals China and Pakistan.

Perhaps the most remarkable news in a year of Eurasian overreach by India was the revelation that New Delhi had been considering the establishment of an Indian Air Force base in, of all places, Mongolia.

But the most significant development was perhaps the thwarting of India's signature piece of air-base diplomacy - in the tiny but suddenly crucial nation of Tajikistan - thanks to Chinese resistance and Russian mistrust.

In many ways, the Russia-India strategic partnership looks like a bad marriage, with each side using the relationship to wrangle over, attempt to obscure, and unwittingly reveal their inadequacies.

The clearest sign of Russia's failure to gain traction for its diplomatic initiatives in

Europe and Asia was perhaps the desperately effusive welcome it gave to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in December.

Manmohan was promised delivery of the aircraft carrier *Admiral Gorshkov*, which has been languishing in Russian hands because of a dispute over the cost of upgrading it for delivery to India. In return - though the sequence of quid pro quo may have gone the other way - India agreed to exercise its new privileges under its US-brokered nuclear deal to buy four civilian nuclear reactors from Russia.

The joint communique issued at the summit endorsed a key Indian aspiration - permanent membership on the UN Security Council - and extolled the virtues of an alphabet soup of multilateral talking shops from the Group of 20 to BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), RIC (Russia, India and China) and the relatively unheralded "Heiligendamm - L'Aquila Process" - that acknowledge India's growing international stature.

It also pointedly advocated Indian membership in two organizations that have demonstrated a marked unwillingness to welcome New Delhi: the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) and the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) forum. Students of geography will note that there is no clear justification for including India in either organization. SCO addresses the security and integration issues across common borders affecting Russia, China, and four "Stans" created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. APEC is a regional grouping designed to expedite reduction of the trade barriers erected by the notoriously protectionist economies on the western side of the Pacific Rim.

Beyond irking Beijing and creating an additional counterweight to China - which is undoubtedly the decisive voice behind the scenes arguing for exclusion of New Delhi from the SCO and APEC - Russia's endorsement of India's desire to push its way into these two fora appears to represent an attempt to gain vitally needed support from a credible, emerging superpower for Moscow's faltering security doctrine.

In December, Russia published a long-gestating draft treaty, the European Security Treaty, meant to replace the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as the mechanism for managing disputes on the continent. The response from the West has been resounding silence, and it appears that NATO - composed largely of states that hate, fear, or mistrust Russia - will remain Moscow's nettlesome interlocutor on the continent.

Russia has also promoted the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), composed of a hodge-podge of ex-Soviet states and Stans, as a kinder and gentler successor to the Warsaw Pact. Moscow wishes that the CSTO would be recognized by its members and the outside world as a valued and pre-eminent mechanism for injecting responsible Russian power into security issues on the fringes of the former Soviet empire, especially Afghanistan.

Russia has been laboring with scant success to leverage its potential utility on Afghanistan into Western recognition of the CSTO. The United States and NATO members have instead concentrated on bilateral negotiations with Uzbekistan,

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The existence of the CSTO is barely acknowledged.

In its dealings with the ex-Soviet states, Russia is still haunted by the shovel-to-the-back-of-the-head foreign policy legacy of the USSR. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin succumbed to the urge to respond to Georgia's admittedly over-the-top provocations (and the West's high-handed orchestration of the independence of Kosovo) with overwhelming force in 2008.

Russia won the war but no overt backing from ex-Soviet states. The two breakaway statelets of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have, aside from Russia, attracted diplomatic recognition only from Nauru, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and "Transnistria", itself an unrecognized pro-Russian breakaway republic carved from Moldova.

Moscow also suffers from the resentment and suspicion of the Central Asian Stans and beyond over its attempts to build a culture of dependency on Russian military might and arms sales.

India - Russia's largest arms customer - has endured legendary difficulties in its arms dealings with Moscow, culminating in the case of the *Admiral Gorshkov* - the long-promised (initial agreement was made early in 2004) but endlessly withheld aircraft carrier whose purchase price inflated from less than US\$1 billion to well over \$2 billion after the contract was signed between Moscow and New Delhi. Russia's anxiety has increased exponentially as India enjoys its new strategic partnership - and the potential for arms sales - with the United States instead.

While Russia struggles with its diplomatic isolation and tries to enlist the support of India, it is confronted with the apparent success of a Eurasian regional grouping centered on China - the SCO.

There is an undeniable security element to the SCO, which was formed in part to assist the rulers of the newly independent Stans in resisting both US-sponsored color revolutions such as the Tulip Revolution that eventually roiled Kyrgyzstan, and brutal Islamicist insurgencies such as the seven-year revolt that plunged Tajikistan into civil war - and ensure that governments, forces, and ideologies inimical to China's control of its restive Muslim autonomous region of Xinjiang did not take root in the region.

The Western commentariat appears obsessed with Central Asian blocs, possibly as a threat to the US franchise as manager of the dominant NATO bloc, and periodically denigrates the SCO for its lack of cohesion and fearsome regional muscle that, in its view, renders the SCO unworthy of engagement.

However, the point of the SCO is multi-lateral economic and security integration that creates a profitable, stable, and strategically friendly backyard for China, not to expend political and diplomatic capital in a futile attempt to weld the bickering central Asian Stans into a monolithic pro-Beijing bloc.

China has resisted calls to use the SCO as the basis for a military alliance.

Undoubtedly, its considerations are shaped by awareness that any military organization would be dominated by the Russians and attract the overwhelmingly hostile interest of the US. In any case, it would be virtually impossible to get the disorganized and mutually bickering Stans to agree on any security goal beyond suppressing internal threats to their current leadership - the only task for which the increasingly undemocratic republics have shown any real interest or aptitude.

Finally, China is very anxious to keep a lid on things in Central Asia and avoid escalated conflicts that might provide inspiration, strategic space, and fighters and materiel to the aggrieved Uyghur separatists of Xinjiang.

The SCO has a permanent security office in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, known by its unfortunate acronym of RATS, which is designed to assist the member states in combating the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism and separatism.

Beijing's vision for Central Asia, of course, involves using its geographic, economic and financial strengths to demonstrate the advantages of stable, pro-Chinese regimes to the nervous rulers of Central Asia.

At the October meeting of SCO prime ministers, China's Wen Jiabao reiterated a pledge of \$10 billion in loans to member states to help them ride out the global financial crisis.

China's extensive economic penetration of Central Asia is a matter of public record.

The eyes of the world - at least the Eurasian gas pipeline-obsessed world - were riveted on the bank of the Amu Darya River on December 14 as the leaders of China, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan turned the valves ceremonially commissioning a pipeline that will carry 30 billion cubic meters per annum of Turkmenistan gas over Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to Xinjiang and, from there, onward to China's heartland.

It is a big, multi-national project - built at a cost of \$7.3 billion and 1,833 kilometers long - whose success is attributable to China's diplomatic finesse and financial muscle in Central Asia.

An oil industry observer nicely illustrated the distinction between promoting regional integration and assembling a geopolitical bloc, in pointing out that Turkmenistan now has a major alternative outlet to Russia's contentious and overbearing Gazprom to move its gas to market - and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will also be able to piggyback their product onto the pipeline. This was noted in the article "China's gas supply from Turkmenistan" published on December 28, 2009, by Hurriyet Daily News:

The additional bargaining power Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan gained from diversifying their energy export routes, thanks to the Chinese assistance, strengthens their political and economic independence and reinforces regional stability and security and that achievement deserves recognition.

Russia's riposte to the effectiveness of China's SCO-based penetration of Central Asia appears to be to assert the existence of an existential narcotics and Islamicist security crisis in Central Asia, one that can only be resolved with recourse to Russian military muscle.

Up to a point, Russia has been able to enlist India - now firmly committed to the civilization-versus-terror narrative courtesy of its burgeoning partnership with the US - in endorsing this world view.

Russia and India share a convergence of strategic interests in Afghanistan, one that conflicts with China's desire to let the Pashtuns sort things out in their own bloody fashion under the watchful eye of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence.

Russia hopes to leverage the Afghan crisis into an acceptance of Moscow's security leadership by Stans vulnerable to Taliban-inspired Islamic militancy. India recognizes any victory by pro-Pakistan Pashtun factions, Taliban or otherwise, in Afghanistan as a defeat for its efforts to distract and bedevil Pakistan.

This shared interest was reflected in the joint statement of Manmohan and President Dmitry Medvedev, which used the rhetoric of terrorism to preclude negotiating with the Taliban insurgency - the unacknowledged centerpiece of the US strategy to cobble together a political settlement and depart the benighted region.

The communique stated: "[Russia and India] agree that the fight against terrorism cannot be selective, and drawing false distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban would be counter-productive."

But a meaningful alliance between Russia and India appears to founder on the collision between Moscow's crude anti-diplomacy and India's ineffectual and opportunistic outreach. Their divergence of interests is neatly illustrated in the determined dance of the two powers with the tiny republic of Tajikistan.

Tajikistan borders Afghanistan to the north. The Tajik ethnic group disregards the artificial border and dominates northwestern Afghanistan, including the Ferghana Valley, the legendary bulwark of the anti-Pashtun, anti-Taliban Tajik leader and Russian asset, Ahmad Shah Massoud.

Russia relied on Tajikistan to provide a logistical rear area for its support of the Northern Alliance during the period of Taliban domination. India pitched in by constructing a military hospital at the town of Farkhor in Tajikistan territory a scant two kilometers from the Afghan border. Massoud, mortally wounded by an al-Qaeda hit squad, died at the hospital two days before the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Now, Tajikistan is the new hotspot in the global "war on terror" as it forms the centerpiece of US Central Command commander General David Petraeus' efforts to support the Afghan surge with a new supply route - the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) - bypassing Pakistan - and bringing an ocean of cash, development, graft and trouble to the impoverished mountain republic.

Tajikistan security has deteriorated markedly as militants fleeing the Pakistan government crackdown in Waziristan have found refuge in Tajikistan's vulnerable border regions. Tajikistan's Taliban problems have also been exacerbated by the movement of militants to Afghanistan's previously peaceful northern border districts to attack the NDN.

In addition to the US and NATO, Russia and India sense opportunity in Tajikistan, giving the local boss, Emomali Rahmon, a chance to play off one interested party against the other and settle old scores - and reveal the fragility of the strategic partnership between Russia and India in Central Asia.

After the US-led invasion, India maintained its presence at Farkhor and, in a virtually unreported development, quietly negotiated terms in 2002 for its first significant military base outside India, at the Ayni airport on the outskirts of Tajikistan's capital of Dushanbe.

India's ubiquitous quasi-military Border Roads Organization - which increasingly finds itself operating beyond India's borders in places like Afghanistan - went to work expanding Ayni's runway. Stories were floated to anxious observers in Beijing and Islamabad that India would station helicopters or even MiG fighters at Ayni in order to project its power into the remote corners of Central Asia.

The catch was that Ayni would be operated in rotation by Russia, India and Tajikistan, and the Indian Air Force would be reliant on Russia's good offices and logistical support to maintain its presence.

In 2007, an Indian defense website reported:

The Russians have given India the option of sending a squadron of Mi-17 helicopters to Ayni, with a detachment of pilots and support personnel. With Russia and Uzbekistan just next door, logistics support has been assured. Russia has also offered to build fighter maintenance infrastructure at Ayni with India. The option will be made available to India to base a squadron of MiG-29 fighters at the base, but this will not be in the near future, though the implications of this are huge - Indian fighters can be scrambled at a moment's notice for operations anywhere in the area. With mid-air refuelling support promised by the Russians, their reach will be immense.

But what Russia giveth, it taketh away.

Russia has been eyeing India's rapprochement with the US with considerable jealousy and anxiety. It apparently also covets Ayni (and the runway improved by India) as a platform for its own aircraft, so the Russian-backed security collective, the CSTO, can

make a statement of its importance in the suddenly significant northern Afghan theater.

Last September, India apparently tried to bypass its putative partner, Russia, and play its own bilateral hand in Tajikistan. India's President Pratibha Patil paid an unprecedented visit to Tajikistan to talk up potential economic, aid, security links and India's interest in Ayni.

However, reports indicate that Tajikistan, responding to some combination of Russian resentment, Chinese objections, and insufficient bribery, decided to evict 150 Indian military engineers, support staff, and trainers from Ayni.

Russia's desire to demonstrate its leverage over its putative strategic partner seems to have been decisive.

An Indian defense website picked up a report from the News Post India: "This [Russian pressure] appears to be a ploy for more concessions and indulgence from India," a senior military officer associated with the Central Asian Region said. Its Moscow's way of telling New Delhi not to "stray" into the American military hardware camp, the official told IANS.

India annually conducts defense business of over \$1.5 billion [...] with Russia, and since the 1960s has acquired Soviet and Russian military equipment worth over \$30 billion.

Over the next decade, military planners anticipate purchases of over \$40 billion to replace or upgrade India's predominantly Soviet and Russian defense equipment that have reached collective obsolescence.

Moscow is understandably anxious to encash this potential and is wary of competition from other suppliers, particularly the US, in support of IAF's latest requirement of 126 multi-role combat aircraft.

Alongside, India is deadlocked in delicate discussions with Russia wanting to renegotiate its \$85 billion Sukhoi 30MKI multi-role fighter deal by demanding a higher price for the timely delivery of the combat aircraft with the agreed specifications.

In July, reportedly at the behest of a seemingly "displeased" Moscow, Tajik Foreign Minister Hamrahon Zaripov declared that Dushanbe was not negotiating with New Delhi about permitting India a military base at Ayni.

As the US demonstrated in its convoluted but ultimately successful (and expensive) efforts to forestall eviction from its airbase at Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan, even apparently hopeless situations can be turned around through the right combination of concessions to Russia and payoffs to the local potentate.

So India might still find a precarious foothold for its air force in Tajikistan, but it will remain beholden to the support of its unpopular Russian patron for its continued presence.

It is not surprising that Russia's heavy-handed approach to Central Asia security, India's aspirations, and military sales has forestalled a genuine strategic partnership between Moscow and New Delhi that will counter the "soft power" outreach of Beijing through the SCO.

While acknowledging seemingly every international organization that engages India - or, like the SCO, resists India's determined efforts to engage with it - the December Russia-India communique made no mention of Russia's pet geopolitical projects: the European Security Treaty or the CTSO.

However, for the time being New Delhi seems bereft of its own strategy and resources for advancing its independent interests in Central Asia.

As long as India continues to rely on its equivocal relationship as an auxiliary to Russia and, increasingly, the US in their great power machinations in Central Asia, it is likely that India and Russia will keep spinning their gears as China and the SCO continue to move ahead.