

Russia Interview

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1). How would you assess the current level of political and economic cooperation between Russia and India? How did the situation with the coronavirus pandemic affect him? What is the role of the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF)-2021 in the further development of Russian-Indian relations?

Ans: India-Russia Annual Summits have been held regularly every year so far. The outcome for each of the four pillars over the past twenty years has been uneven. This has been due to both obstacles within the domestic jurisdiction of India and Russia, as well as a steadily deteriorating international environment that has put unexpected pressures on the development of normal relations between the two partners.

While India and Russia have identified ways to overcome the existing gaps in their domestic structures to enable greater bilateral cooperation, the biggest external obstacle faced by their partnership today is from the growing confrontation between the

United States and China.

This confrontation, driven by aggressive unilateral measures based on the narrow domestic priorities of the two powers, has an impact on the India-Russia strategic partnership.

Both Russia and India stand for a multipolar world, an equitable, transparent global governance that takes into account the interests of all members of the international community.

Their membership in BRICS, where the agenda of reshaping the global political and economic order has a special place, facilitates the process of crafting common approaches to the global governance principles.

Nevertheless, there is an implicit difference, often overlooked by the observers, in Moscow's and New Delhi's perceptions of how the multipolar world should be organized and governed. Their views stem from different security concerns defining the two states' foreign policy priorities.

Russian humanitarian assistance continues to arrive in India, the Russian Ambassador in India has reiterated the importance of the Indo-Russian strategic partnership in these crucial times and serves as a

timely reminder of what joint cooperation is capable of achieving even in the face of adversity.

A close friend of India, Russia has been at the forefront in helping India tide over this current crisis by sending crucial supplies of medical equipment, medicines and vaccines to augment capacity for an overburdened healthcare fraternity.

The EEF is geared towards showcasing the little known potential held by the easternmost area of Russia which is rich in minerals and other resources.

The EEF focuses on development of business and investment opportunities in the Russian Far East Region, and presents enormous potential for developing close as well as mutually beneficial co-operation between India and Russia in the region.

Russian Far East is a resource rich region is rich in various natural resources like oil, natural gas, timber, gold and diamond. An area of special interest for India is the exploration of hydrocarbon reserves along the coast of Russia's Far East. The Forum will help India to gain access to these valuable resources easily mainly to oil and gas in order to meet its rising domestic demands.

2). More recently, JSC "Russian Railways Logistics" and the Finnish logistics operator Nurminen Logistics

Services OY have completed testing of a multimodal route from Finland to India along the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The transit time of the cargo on the way from the Vuosaari station to the port of Nava Sheva took 18 days. The total delivery time, taking into account the waiting time of the corresponding vessel at the port of shipment, was 30 days. How do you assess the work done? Will it affect the promotion of the INSTC project?

Ans: Presently, the INSTC connects India with Nordic Europe, Central Asia, Russia, and has the potential to expand up to the Baltic and Arctic regions – which are slowly being drawn into the Northern Sea Passage route as that becomes economically viable.

Multimodal routes through sea, rail, and road under the INSTC aim to reduce the carriage cost between India and Russia by about 30% and bring down the transit time from 40 days by more than half.

The INSTC connectivity initiative, when viewed with its underlying commercial advantages, can initiate transformative development in the region, facilitating trade, transit, and overall economic development.

INSTC is an ideal start to project India as a big global player. Even though the investment is well worth with its economic, political and geo-strategic benefits, it is testing India's financial backbone. India can do well to

rope in other interested parties for partnering in the project, like other countries who also see Eurasia as a lucrative market for its products.

While the North-South Corridor holds immense potential, its full realisation is contingent on the resolution of the bottlenecks and constraints impeding its progress.

It is imperative to understand that the main selling point of the corridor is commercial gain from increased connectivity. The INSTC members must avail and make practical and effective use of its complementarity with the existing grid of transnational corridors in Eurasia owing to the North-South axis that the corridor operates on.

India had expected to expand its influence into the Eurasian heartland through the project's terminal port of Chabahar, but New Delhi's compliance with Washington's unilateral sanctions regime against Tehran out of fear of so-called secondary sanctions was a severe setback.

India might be compelled to recalibrate its strategy if plans for a Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan (PAKAFUZ) railway make its International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) redundant with respect to its Central Asian outreach efforts.

India has taken some important steps over the last

decade to enhance its connectivity along terrestrial and maritime routes with the rest of the region. India has begun to look beyond what was long considered its immediate neighbourhood and has begun to focus on its extended neighbourhood in order to achieve its connectivity objectives.

In 2020, there were differences between Iran and India over New Delhi being kept out of the Chabahar-Zahedan railway, but the matter was resolved. After Biden's electoral victory and, based on his promise to return the US to the JCPOA, India renewed its efforts to develop the Chabahar facility.

In January 2021, India shipped its first instalment of equipment, two 140-ton mobile harbour cranes, to assist it in that effort. India is also likely to start full-scale operations soon at Chabahar general cargo.

3). Iran recently held presidential elections. The conservative Ebrahim Raisi became the new head of the country. How do you assess the past political changes and will the change of power affect the promotion of the INSTC project?

Ans: The new president, Ebrahim Raisi, has been elected to office at a time when Iran's economy reels from US sanctions and dire economic conditions, further compounded by the ramifications of the

COVID-19 pandemic. To legitimise his presidency and to fulfil his election promises, Raisi's administration will likely prioritise the economy.

There are claims that Raisi, who hails from the Khorasan province, belongs to a political school that believes in expanding ties with countries in the East, including India; it is also believed that Raisi has an affinity towards India.

A point of inflection could come on Iran's eastern front, in Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of war is pushing the country closer to a civil war, with the Taliban making inroads into capturing territory and pushing the Afghan government and the armed forces on the run.

However, a Taliban push against minority Shia Hazara population in Afghanistan has already seen the emergence of Iran-backed militia ecosystems to fight against Taliban transgressions.

Bilateral ties took a massive hit after India stopped importing oil from Iran in mid-2019 because of sanctions imposed by the former Trump administration. At the time, Iran was among India's top three energy suppliers.

Iran has also been upset at the pace of development

of Chabahar port by the Indian side. Recent moves by Tehran to develop a railway line to Chabahar and the Farzad B gas field without Indian involvement have not gone down well with New Delhi.

India's policy has been to engage with whichever regime comes to power in Iran. So, there is going to be little bearing on bilateral ties. Raisi's election will have a positive impact on India-Iran relations only if he is able to get the sanctions lifted. Only then will India be able to do business with Iran and go back to buying Iranian oil and go ahead with its connectivity plans through the Chabahar port and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Raisi stressed that Iran holds special importance to boosting ties with India and said new steps must be taken to develop bilateral, regional and international relations with a new perspective.

There are various sectors, especially in economic and commercial fields, as well as new technologies, that both countries should use to promote the level of our relations.

Subtle yet important events in the India-Iran bilateral stand tall as the strategic position of Iran in New Delhi's calculus gets heightened amidst increasing instability in Afghanistan, the aftershocks of which could be felt across Central Asia.

4). Iran and India have been jointly developing the Chabahar port in recent years, which is the starting point of the so-called Chabahar corridor from India to Afghanistan. How do the current events in Afghanistan affect the implementation of the Chabahar Corridor project? Can the port of Chabahar reorient itself to work within the framework of the INSTC today?

Ans: Keen to extend its BRI to Afghanistan to get an alternate axis to warm water in Gulf, should CPEC face problems, besides exploiting mineral wealth of Afghanistan. China has been actively involved with Taliban during peace process. Iran is economically weak and needs Chinese support. The China Iran strategic partnership fructifying \$400 billion deal may be an impediment for Indian entry routes into Afghanistan through Chabahar and further connectivity to International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), although Iran has not given any signals of disruption of these project.

The Chabahar port agreement between India and Iran was a huge step forward in New Delhi's involvement in the Persian Gulf and, through the port, to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Indian point of view as per which it may not be a happy situation in light of its heavy investments. India

is in touch with Russia, whose interests do converge with India in this region, being a stakeholder in INSTC for connectivity with Central Asia and Eurasia. INSTC through Afghanistan is the shortest route for Central Asia to warm water, hence they will prefer it over Sino-Pakistan offer of connectivity through CPEC.

The study finds that as long as Afghanistan remains in a state of ongoing conflict and political instability, it will not be able to strengthen its position in the region to materialize its regional connectivity ambitions. Countries need to feel that Afghanistan is a safe trade and transit hub and that they can realize a return on their investments.

Being a land-locked country, imports into Afghanistan are either routed through Pakistan or Iran. Compared to imports via Karachi or Bandar Abbas, Chabahar is a much closer route into Afghanistan.

The United States also wanted Afghanistan to be dependent more on India-Iran than on Pakistan.

Afghanistan was also more friendly to India and even signed a transit agreement with India and Iran to complement the port project.

India's participation in the development of Chabahar Port will provide India an alternative and reliable access route into Afghanistan utilising India's earlier

investment in building the Zaranj-Delaram highway in that country.

Afghanistan's geostrategic significance is its linkage to Central Asia, Iran, China and Pakistan, and indirectly to India too; its location is central to the communication links.

Its diverse ethnic composition and existence in a potent zone through which connectivity is afforded to various countries, gives it a unique advantage. An implosion within such a country always has far-reaching consequences.

India's investment of 3 billion USD in soft power resources to bring development and social order is a contribution to the future of Afghanistan. It aligned with the US through a commonality of interests but with the US having unilaterally withdrawn Indian interests appear compromised, especially as Pakistan works overtime to neutralize Indian influence.

The takeover happened so fast that it left millions of Afghans stunned and most parts of the world in shock. Harrowing visuals have surfaced from all parts of Afghanistan, with fear gripping the nation over the prospect of the return 1990-like Taliban regime.

Most of these assets have been captured by the Taliban, which regained control over Afghanistan 20

years after it was forced to flee by the US-led forces. For India, however, the possibility of losing a key strategic ally in South Asia may surpass the concerns related to its \$3 billion investment in Afghanistan.

Collapse of the Afghan government and return of the Taliban marks the beginning of a new phase in the India-Afghanistan relationship.

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