



DELHI POLICY GROUP

Meeting of Heads of Think Tanks of India and Russia

Moscow

September 22-23, 2016

Balancing Asia: Russia's "Asian Pivot" and India's "Act East"

Address by Ambassador H.K. Singh, Director General, DPG

September 23, 2016

Let me begin by recalling the immutable factor that determines Russia's place in the world order: command over both the heartland and the rimland of what strategists have long recognised as the "pivot area" of the world endows Russia with enormous geo-strategic significance. Relations with Russia have been an indispensable element of India's foreign policy since independence.

My task is to focus on Russia's intended role and contributions as an Asian power, its relations with China and presence in the Asia Pacific. I will address the role of Russia's Asian Pivot and India's Act East Policy in balancing Asia from the conviction that this will be a determining factor for our future as strategic partners. Seen from India's perspective, Russia is significantly underinvested in its broader strategic engagement with Asia.

It is widely recognised that the world is witnessing the most significant shift in global power since 1991 and Asia lies at the heart of this ongoing flux. I have been struck by repeated references to Eurasia and SCO in remarks by Russian colleagues since yesterday. So let me remind you that the slow rise of Eurasia is enabled mainly by the spectacular rise of maritime Asia, from India to China. There is growing contention among regional initiatives and institutions. For maritime Asia, the East Asia

Summit (EAS) is the principal forum, of which India is a founding member and Russia a member since 2011. And as the Act East Policy indicates, India's vital economic and security interests extend across the interlinked Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific domains.

Both India and Russia find themselves at the crossroads of trends that will determine future global development. These are pushing each of us in new directions that require greater strategic communication and understanding to transition beyond our close but somewhat inertial relations towards a fresh vision of our future together in the 21st century. We must move beyond the past, however comforting that may have been. As Bismarck is said to have observed, "a sentimental policy knows no reciprocity".

Two central tenets enunciated by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in an essay on Russia's foreign policy earlier this year come to mind. First, that reliable solutions to the problems of the modern world can only be achieved through serious cooperation between the leading states and their associations. And second, which is most relevant in the present Asian context, Russia's belief in a system of international relations based on balance of forces and mutual consideration for national interests, ruling out the total dominance of one state.

India would be happy to join Russia in securing a similar order for Asia today, not least as we are increasingly witnessing hegemonic assertions and expansionist ambitions which can derail Asia's continued rise and future. India and Russia both support a multipolar and consensus driven world order where states act on the basis of coordination rather than subordination, inclusivity not dominance. We can be natural partners in creating an Asian security order based on these common principles.

Against this backdrop, let me now turn to some specific elements of Russia's posture in Asia.

Since 2014, Russia has embarked on its "pivot east", which seems focused primarily on China, to the exclusion of other Asian powers, big or small. This pivot appears designed to construct a Russia-China strategic entente, with common goals and agendas, encompassing both economic and

political components. While progress on deepening the economic drivers seems to have stalled, there is ongoing intensification of Russia-China diplomatic, defence and military-to-military ties.

As a country which understands and respects Russia's European and global aspirations, India can regard this growing partnership with China as Russia's counterpoise against US and western domination. But on the flip side, for China, the comfort of this convergence has created strategic room for expanding geo-political and geo-economic dominance, from Eurasia to the Asia Pacific.

Neither India nor Russia gain from China's drive to reshape the regional strategic landscape and establish pre-eminence in Asia. Nor do we gain from a US-China G-2, or indeed from the so-called new type of major power relations between China and the United States which is proposed by Beijing.

Turning to the instrumentalities being used by China, the grand strategic construct Belt and Road or OBOR consolidates China's geo-strategic space. Gains from this unilateral initiative are tilted towards China and a few favoured destinations. We are told that there is complete synergy between Russia's EAEU and China's OBOR initiatives. But what we see is that Eurasia is being incrementally usurped by China under the pretext of peripheral integration, with long term geopolitical implications.

Closer to India, the \$46 billion CPEC is the main operational focus of OBOR with major implications for South Asia and the Indian Ocean, as well as the overall balance of power in Asia. India's historic access routes to its natural hinterland in Central Asia and West Asia have been disrupted by Pakistan since 1947. CPEC, apart from violating India's territorial sovereignty, is designed to further entrench India's strategic, security and economic disadvantages in the region. It delivers strategic depth for China in Pakistan on the one hand, access denial and strategic encirclement for India on the other. And as the PLA makes steady inroads into Pakistan and the China-Pakistan nexus intensifies, it is also abundantly clear that China's counter-terrorism posture is more about regime security in its far west than serious engagement in the global coalition against terrorism.

Russia will obviously determine its relations with China based on its own interests. But as managing overlapping and sometimes conflicting interests becomes more complex in Asia, China's denial of India's security interests and resistance to India's rise in the Asian and global order should be manifest for our Russian partners.

Moving across to the other side of the continent, India would like to see the extension of the Russian "pivot to Asia" to the Asia Pacific, specifically Japan. After 70 years, there is new hope for moving beyond the lingering legacy of World War II. The conclusion of a Russia-Japan peace treaty, and the enhancement of Japan-Russia economic and security cooperation, will enable both Russia and Japan to more effectively balance their respective relations with China. President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe have now met 14 times since 2013, and will meet again on December 15 in Nagato, Japan indicating their resolve to achieve a breakthrough on economic ties and territorial issues. The success of their efforts will provide greater security and stability for Asia as a whole.

The Asia Pacific is becoming an arena of geopolitical contention between China and the US. But the fact also is that from the East China Sea to the South China Sea, the region is destabilized by China's unprecedented historical claims and "unquestionable" assertions of sovereignty over vast areas of maritime territory, which have included island building, grey zone incursions and coercive threats on rival claimants. Chinese pressure has disrupted the cohesion of regional institutions like ASEAN, the only successful regional association in Asia which is also central to promoting a cooperative approach to regional security.

In this prevailing scenario, "Joint Sea 2016", Russia's largest ever naval and military exercise with China held in the South China Sea this month, appears to signal support for China's territorial assertions, or at least its sphere of influence, and alignment with China in opposition to the US.

We would like to hope that Russia will assert its own security and economic influence in South East Asia. India would greatly welcome a more energetic Russian engagement with ASEAN and the middle powers of Asia.

Finally, prospects for Asia's progress remain strong. If there is an overarching concern, it arises from the deficit of regional security architecture to mediate power shifts and uphold a rules-based order. Since 2011, EAS membership includes all states with a stake in regional security, stability and prosperity. The EAS provides a dialogue-centred platform for regional security cooperation, but its potential continues to be constrained by China. Given the plurality of national systems and security perspectives in the region, there is little possibility in the near future of an OSCE-type, treaty-based security architecture in Asia as proposed by Russia. For the present, ASEAN-led dialogue forums like the EAS and ADMM Plus will continue to co-exist in parallel with bilateral security arrangements and alliances.

To conclude, our countries' respective interests in Asia need to be re-oriented in a manner that they are in greater consonance with each other. The India-Russia partnership has the capacity to shape a favourable configuration of power in Asia. But to achieve that potential, we will need to extend our considerable convergences in Central and West Asia across the continent to include the Asia Pacific. India would welcome a more comprehensive Russian "Pivot to Asia" which contributes to a multipolar balance in the Asia Pacific, which best serves both our interests.

The Delhi Policy Group will look forward to continued participation in future meetings of this India-Russia Think Tanks' Forum and to engaging with our individual partners among Russia's major think tanks.