

MODI LEADS INDIA TO THE SILK ROAD

With Beijing having had a profound rethink on India's admission as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the tectonic plates of the geopolitics of a massive swathe of the planet stretching from the Asia-Pacific to West Asia are dramatically shifting.

That grating noise in the Central Asian steppes will be heard far and wide -- as far as North America, says Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar.

On the face of it, China has so far been reluctant about India's admission as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

According to latest reports, Beijing has had a profound rethink.

At the SCO foreign ministers meeting last Thursday in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, a decision has been taken that the grouping will formally invite India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia as members at its next summit in September.

To be sure, Russia would be immensely pleased. A Moscow pundit promptly estimated that India's admission into the SCO will pave the way for the grouping to hold itself out as a 'centre of power in world politics.'

Make no mistake, the tectonic plates of the geopolitics of a massive swathe of the planet stretching from the Asia-Pacific to West Asia are dramatically shifting and that grating noise in the Central Asian steppes will be heard far and wide -- as far as North America.

The big question remains: What made China shift its stance?

We know that at the 90-minute meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Fortaleza, Brazil, on the sidelines of the recent BRICS summit, the subject of India's role in the SCO did come up.

Several reasons could be attributed to the 'new thinking' in Beijing. First and foremost, China may sense that under Modi's leadership, India is all set to pursue a genuinely independent foreign policy.

The idea of an 'independent foreign policy' has been a cliché in Indian discourses and has been bandied about cavalierly by many governments in India.

But the plain truth is that ever since India embarked on economic reforms a couple of decades ago, the Western industrialized world -- the US, in particular -- assumed centrality in the Indian calculus.

Subtle shifts in the country's foreign policy trajectory ensued, helped in no small measure by interest groups and lobbies in India.

This trend became much pronounced through the past decade under then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's leadership and at times India seemed to be succumbing to the charms of a new form of entrapment -- of the mind.

Unsurprisingly, China's hesitation hitherto stemmed from its unspoken worry that India might work as a 'Trojan horse' for the Americans within the SCO tent, which was, of course, unacceptable since the grouping has been of critical importance to Beijing in the pursuit of its regional policies as well as for safeguarding the country's own territorial integrity and national security.

It is from such a perspective that Modi's imprimatur that is already visible in India's foreign policies needs to be judged. Clearly, the compass of India's foreign policy is being reset.

Modi has taken to the BRICS like fish to water, which surprised most Indian observers who were visualizing that the interest groups most vociferously backing his candidature in the parliamentary poll in April would expect him to follow a 'pro-American' foreign policy, driven also by the craving to adopt a muscular approach to India's problematic relationships with China and Pakistan.

However, Modi's meetings on the sidelines of the BRICS summit with Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin brought out his conviction that India's long-term interests are best served by forging closer strategic partnerships with these two world powers.

Again, most expectedly, instead of beating war drums, Modi let loose peace doves into the South Asian skies.

And, least of all came his audacious decision to demand that Delhi cannot ratify the World Trade Organizations' so-called trade facilitation agreement if it jeopardized India's food security.

Modi took this decision in the national interest, unperturbed by the fact that he is due to visit the US and anticipating that it will be seen as an unhelpful act by the Barack Obama administration and will annoy the Washington establishment and American business lobbies.

What emerges out of all these is that Modi has a world vision as regards the co-relation of forces internationally today and can fathom where it is that India's core interests would lie.

Modi is a reclusive and enigmatic personality and has spoken hardly anything on world politics, but he seems to have thought through a great deal in the privacy of his mind. That much is a safe guess.

Suffice to say, Modi supported the emergence of the BRICS development bank with great deliberation, knowing fully well that such a move challenges the dominance of the US dollar in the world economy and will seriously undermine the Bretton Woods system that provided a vital underpinning for the advancement and preservation of the United States' global hegemony for the past several decades.

If one ventures to put an intellectual construct on such trends as are available in these past 70 days that might eventually go into a 'Modi Doctrine', it would probably consist of the following elements:

- Modi has a pronounced 'India-first' approach, which is a rooted belief as well.
- But he is not dogmatic when it comes to the pursuit of India's national interests.
- Nor is it divested of emotions. The human factor is obvious from his trademark slogan, '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*'

(meaning, inclusive development) and he visualizes the foreign policy as an extension of national policies.

- India needs help for development from all available sources and there is willingness to source it without pride or prejudice.
- India needs a friendly external environment that is conducive to development and acts as a buffer for its national security. Modi places great store on regional cooperation.
- Modi visualizes that India's 'influence' in its region is critically dependent on its capacity to carry the small neighbors along on the path of growth and prosperity that would make them genuine stakeholders -- rather than by demanding respect or insisting on 'influence' on the basis of its pre-eminence in the region as a military and economic power and through 'muscle-flexing'.
- He reposes confidence in the country's inherent advantages as a regional power and is not paranoid about any 'string of pearls' chocking India.
- Modi believes in promoting India's commonality of interests with other emerging powers that also have been denied their due role in the global political and economic architecture, which was erected by the West out of the debris of World War II and has become archaic, but remains impervious to change and reform.

The above elements are more or less visible and their interplay presents an engaging sight.

The dire predictions regarding the quintessential Modi have proved to be largely baloney -- that, for instance, a nasty confrontation between India and Pakistan was inevitable once Modi took over as prime minister.

Or that, China's PLA would 'test' Modi's grit by pitching a tent or two on the disputed Indian territory.

But nothing of the sort has happened. Discerning analysts, on the contrary, have noted some accommodative attitudes on China's part toward India in the most recent period.

Similarly, it is China that Modi has engaged most intensively so far.

A large corpus of Indian pundits have been emphatically predicting that Modi would form an axis with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe to counter Beijing's 'assertiveness' in the Asia-Pacific.

Curiously, however, by the time Modi gets around to seeing Obama (or Abe), he would have twice met Xi already.

Coming back to India's impending membership of the SCO, there are three salient's that draw attention.

First, the timing of the SCO decision to admit India; secondly, how SCO is poised to evolve; and, third, what India can make out of its SCO membership. Each needs some elaboration.

During his visit to New Delhi last week, United States Secretary of State John Kerry (*in image, left, with Prime Minister Modi and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj*) was asked at a media interaction where India would stand in Washington's scheme of things as regards its recent sanctions against Russia.

Kerry accepted that he was disappointed but appeared resigned to India's stance. 'We would obviously welcome India joining in with us with respect to that (*sanctions*). But it is up to them. It is India's choice.'

It does not need much ingenuity to figure out that the SCO is taking the decision to admit India at a defining moment in the post-Cold War era politics.

India's SCO membership is fructifying hardly days before Modi's first-ever meeting with Obama. The point is, the SCO is also taking a calculated decision to invite India to become a full member.

The backdrop to the SCO decision is extremely relevant. The US is pursuing a dual containment policy toward Russia and China, the two prime movers of the SCO. The US, on the other hand, has been assiduously wooing India as a strategic ally.

From the American viewpoint, India's SCO membership will inevitably impact the future trajectory of the US-Indian strategic partnership even as India is unavailable as 'counterweight' against China or as an accomplice to 'isolate' Russia.

India being a major power in Asia, its policy of 'non-alignment' grates against the US's rebalance strategy.

On a more fundamental plane, it needs to be understood that if the SCO has often been called the 'NATO of the East', it was not without reason -- although the grouping is far from a military alliance in the classic sense.

The SCO has disallowed a security vacuum appearing in Central Asia, which NATO might have seized as alibi to step in. Put differently, so long as the SCO is around, NATO's eastward expansion beyond the Caucasus remains blocked.

Meanwhile, it also needs to be factored in that the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization work shoulder to shoulder on regional security.

The two organizations challenge the US strategy to project NATO as a global security organization.

The admission of India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia constitutes a major setback for America's regional strategies.

For one thing, an expanded SCO provides 'strategic depth' for Russia. The US and European Union's sanctions against Russia will be rendered even more toothless.

It weakens the American hand in the negotiations vis-a-vis Iran insofar as the sanctions regime aimed at isolating Iran becomes unsustainable.

It debilitates America's 'pivot' strategy in Asia; it diminishes its capacity to dictate terms to Afghanistan (or Pakistan).

In strategic terms, the stunning reality is that by the end of this year, the SCO will have as members' four nuclear powers plus one 'threshold power'.

In geopolitical terms, the SCO will be stepping out of Central Asia and wetting its toes in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

It is entirely conceivable that at some point sooner rather than later the SCO countries may move toward trading in their national currencies, creating banking institutions to fund intra-regional projects and forming preferential trade regimes.

Needless to say, with India, Pakistan and Iran inside the SCO tent, the grouping becomes a lead player in Afghanistan.

The SCO's surge severely cramps the ability of the US to manipulate the forces of radical Islam and terrorism as instruments of regional policies in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

No doubt, from the Afghan perspective, NATO ceases to be the only show in town. This can only strengthen Afghanistan's independence and enable that country to regain its national sovereignty.

An enlarged SCO cannot but view with disquiet the US and NATO's game plan to establish military bases in Afghanistan and to deploy the missile defence system in the Hindu Kush.

In sum, the induction of India, Pakistan and Iran would become a game-changer for the SCO. For the first time in modern history, a collective security organization would be taking shape in a huge landmass on the planet inhabited by some three billion people.

It would significantly boost the impetus toward multi-polarity in world politics by championing the pivotal role of the UN in upholding international law.

How can India make use of its SCO membership? There are four or five directions in which Indian diplomacy can hope to explore new frontiers. The SCO chronicle provides some useful pointers.

Since its inception in the mid-1990s, the SCO provided a platform for Russia, China and Central Asian States to lay to rest the ghosts of the past, namely, the bitter legacy of the Soviet era animosities.

The SCO offered a new pattern of relationship based on equality and shared concerns and commonality of interests that, in turn, helped create trust and confidence leading to the resolution of their

border disputes and the harmonization of their regional security objectives.

There is much food for thought here for India. A window of opportunity opens for Indian diplomats to work with China and Pakistan in a similar spirit as China did with its erstwhile Soviet-era adversaries.

Again, it is no small matter that the army chiefs or spy chiefs of India, China and Pakistan would get to meet and interact within the SCO tent on a regular basis within an institutionalized framework, exchange notes and begin seeking solutions to regional problems.

At the very least, the chances of an India-Pakistan turf war breaking out in Afghanistan would minimize, which would encourage Pakistan, hopefully, to craft a new course jettisoning its obsession with 'strategic depth'.

Curiously, the SCO membership makes Indians and Pakistanis comrades-in-arms in stabilizing Afghanistan. Of course, such a turn of events cannot but have positive fallouts on the overall climate of India-Pakistan relationship.

Again, the SCO enables India to rev up its regional policies and it is no small gain that regional security is not held hostage by the US's unpredictable and capricious policies toward Afghanistan.

Finally, the Silk Road as such would get a massive fillip and within the SCO framework, India could aspire to gain greater access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

India's energy security gets strengthened, too. The time may have come for the creation of an SCO energy club, an idea first mooted by Putin a decade ago.

New possibilities arise for initiating trans-regional energy projects under the auspices of the SCO, such as the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline.

In overall terms, the SCO membership makes the prevailing international situation highly favorable for India's overall development and its rise as a global power.

The best thing about the SCO is that it is not prescriptive and India can preserve its 'strategic autonomy'. Nor is the SCO directed against any country in the world community.

In short, the member-States are entirely at liberty to pursue their foreign policies attuned to their respective national priorities.

That is to say, SCO membership does not stand in the way of India deepening and expanding its multi-faceted cooperation with the US.

On the contrary, it only enhances India's capacity to negotiate a relationship with the US that is truly based on equal footing.

Suffice to say, SCO membership gives added *raison d'etre* and verve to India's non-aligned policies.

Through the six decades or so since the idea of non-alignment was born, the world has changed phenomenally and India too has transformed beyond recognition. But the idea of non-alignment as such continues to have great relevance for India.

The intellectual challenge for India's diplomacy today lies in reinterpreting the idea of non-alignment in tune with the spirit of our times, which is characterized by multi-polarity in international politics, so as to meet our country's needs in the coming period as an emerging power.

That is also what Jawaharlal Nehru would have expected Modi to do as his worthy successor presiding over India's tryst with destiny at a crucial juncture in world politics.

All things considered, therefore, India's SCO membership would signify that the Modi government is charioting India toward a new multi-polar world order where the country's political and diplomatic options will multiply.

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