

India-Russia-China Trilateral on Peace&Stabilisation of Afghanistan (Moscow. June 29-30 2015)

Preface

On June 29-30, 2015, the Delhi Policy Group and the Institute of Oriental Studies held an India-Russia-China trilateral in Moscow to discuss the prospects for peace and stabilization of Afghanistan under the new Government of National Unity and in the shadow of the ISAF withdrawal. The trilateral brought together 12 participants from across the three countries, and included a presentation by a representative from the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Given that former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov sadly passed away shortly before the trilateral began, the meeting opened with participants noting that it was PM Primakov who had first suggested an India-Russia-China dialogue towards regional as well as global cooperation when he visited India in 1998. Subsequently, he worked towards this end, and lived to see the dialogue begin at the summit level. It was fitting that the first Track II initiative for a trilateral dialogue took place at the Institute of Oriental Studies.

As is often the case this first Track II trilateral for regional cooperation to support Afghanistan follows rather than prefigures Track I. An India-Russia-China trilateral has been ongoing at the summit level for several years now, but it deals with all issues of interest to the three countries rather than focusing solely on Afghanistan. We hope therefore that this brief report will be of use to policy analysts and Afghanistan watchers.

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Executive Summary

1. Indian, Russian and Chinese cooperation is vital for both Afghan stabilization and regional economic development. The three countries should:
 - (a) Support and facilitate the National Unity Government of Afghanistan (NUGA);
 - (b) Jointly take the initiative to further regional economic integration with Afghanistan as a transit hub; and
 - (c) Cooperate in the SCO on regional security.

2. Along with other friends of Afghanistan, India, Russia and China should aid the NUGA to hold Parliamentary elections soon and facilitate consensus and/or complementarity between political groups on issues of Afghan national priority.

3. On security, India and China have military training programs for Afghan army officers, though Russia does not. The three countries could however work within the SCO on border security programs for Afghanistan. Russian analysts suggest that the SCO could also initiate regional police cooperation programs with the Afghan National Police.

4. On reconciliation, most participants felt there was some scope for Afghan-Taliban reconciliation, with an Indian caveat that this would depend on whether the latter had some autonomy from Pakistan, but disagreed on the prospects for Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement. However all agreed that China's good offices in this regard could be important.

5. Russian analysts believe that India and China should be more proactive against the Islamic State.

6. The three countries can work within the SCO on development and economic cooperation; counter-narcotics; misuse of internet and social media; and insecurity on their borders and in border areas.

7. For a grand design on regional economic integration, the three countries need to work on how China's 'One Belt One Road', the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and India-Russia-Iran's International North-South Transport Corridor can interconnect.

The National Unity Government of Afghanistan (NUGA)

The Afghan Presidential election of summer 2014 yielded a divided and ethnically polarizing result. It was necessary to reach an inter-ethnic compromise between Tajiks and Pushtuns led by Abdullah and Ghani, and most international and regional actors backed the outcome of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's mediation.

However, the NUGA has been in power for 10 months and its sluggish performance has led to increasing questions regarding its legitimacy. Afghan political leaders point out that the Constitution of Afghanistan does not envisage the creation of a CEO or Prime Ministerial position. Moreover, they add, the issue of disputed election results remains salient, a reference to the fact that Abdullah had a majority of votes according to independent data in the first round of the Presidential election, and the data of the second round was dismissed. Thus some Afghans argue that Abdullah is the more legitimate leader. However, what legitimacy the NUGA has is based on the agreement between the Abdullah and Ghani teams and its U.S. 'guarantee'. Analysts have pointed out that even if the NUGA's standing is rejuvenated, as it will be if it is successful in curbing violence, these divisions will still persist.

The disagreement between Abdullah and Ghani on Cabinet formation was the first major sign of the weakness of the new government: till today there is only an acting Defence Minister. To a large extent the turmoil witnessed in Northern Afghanistan is due to this disagreement. There is no viable mechanism of dispute

settlement between the coalition partners, which makes the internal political structure unstable and prone to external influences and elite competition. The alliance between powerful politicians such as Atta Mohammad Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai might be fleeting and primarily about messaging, but it once again illustrates the pitfalls of the NUGA. Meantime the Parliamentary elections have been postponed to 2016, and could even go to 2017. While the extension of their terms might mollify opposition Parliamentarians and mute their vociferous questioning, prolongation of this situation will further undermine Afghanistan's fledgling institutions. If necessary, the international and regional friends of Afghanistan should urge speedy electoral reforms and the holding of Parliamentary elections.

A critical disagreement between Abdullah and Ghani is over what is referred to as the Afghanistan-Pakistan intelligence-sharing agreement, but which is actually a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Purportedly inked in May, a leaked draft of the MOU commits the two countries to exchange all information regarding militants. It also states that this intelligence is not to be shared with third countries. If correct, it would effectively impose a veto on Afghanistan's relations with other countries, for example neighbors who might be affected by the harboring of, or aid to, militants working against them in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. India is the most vitally-affected, given that the Pakistani military's rationale for involvement in Afghanistan is 'strategic depth' against India, but other neighbors who face cross-border militancy, for example Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, could also suffer.

Russian analysts point out that the underlying problem is that none of the Afghan political leaders want power-sharing in Afghanistan. "Deep divisions remain and there is competition between elites. The success of military operations against the Taliban will depend on the extent that competition divides the NUGA," says one analyst.

Despite the obstacles, there are no viable options out of the NUGA for Abdullah and Ghani. The opposition party headed by Abdullah that had emerged during Karzai's administration has now become part of the government. Consequently, conditions have been created for the emergence of a new opposition in Afghanistan. Former President Karzai has become the figure around whom opposition is coalescing. He has recently visited Moscow, China and India. Today he is seen as head of the Pushtuns and is also looked up to by the minorities. If there were to be fresh Presidential elections, Karzai would win.

This is a fragile situation. While opposition is necessary, there is a danger that a third pole of influence within government will emerge. A political agreement between Karzai, Abdullah and Ghani is required to ensure that the latter does not happen.

The survivability of the NUGA depends to a large extent on continued U.S. support as the guarantor of the political compromise, but it does not hinge entirely on external actors. Internally, Afghanistan's leaders need to appeal to all national ethnic minorities and find a common language with all Afghans. Factions which have

considerable influence on internal political and security dynamics may potentially link up with other external actors to precipitate a crisis if they feel they are being marginalized. Pessimists argue that with different agendas, Afghans are “trying to make the most of their own and sponsors’ interests. Is Ghani capable of exerting his power over Afghans – can he strike common interests – or is he creating space for a coup?” they ask, adding that “the presence of foreign troops will continue to be a thorn preventing stabilization.”

The general consensus, however, was that the NUGA needed to be given more time to prove itself, and in the meantime, neighbors should be both helpful and patient. “Today there is one coalition, there will be others too”, one participant comments. “By the end of the year the situation will be clearer.” The region is also divided on what different countries want in Afghanistan. Without regional consensus on what kind of Afghanistan the neighbors will support, all parties within Afghanistan will be encouraged to blame each other and no one will take responsibility, an Indian analyst points out.

Security

The worsening security situation following the end of the ISAF mission was predicted and has been compounded by the Taliban’s nonstop attacks, from the winter through spring and summer offensives. One factor in the Taliban’s successes was the reduction of air support following the end of the ISAF mission; another was the ambiguous position of the ANDSF, between struggling to be a conventional army and a counter- insurgency force - and in either case being dependent and/or ancillary to an international force. “Karzai described the Afghan army as a paramilitary rather than a regular army,” says a Russian analyst.

For other Russian analysts the situation of the ANA is *déjàvu*. “There were many ghost jobs in the ANA that we funded as Soviets,” says one. “Then too the different wings of security - the army, police and intelligence - did not cooperate. In the past year, 2014-15, we have seen this problem multiply.”

As against this view, most participants agreed that the ANDSF had performed commendably given the odds they were up against during a transition in which their supplies, logistics, air support and military-strategic advisors fell sharply. “Take the example of Sri Lanka,” an Indian analyst underlines. “The Sri Lankan Army was not really a fighting force, they had desertions of up to 20 percent, but then along came a commander who forged them into a force, and they won against a thirty-year long insurgency.”

Yet the problem for the ANDSF is twofold: first, they cannot acquire the weaponry or training they wish for without U.S. and NATO approval as the chief funders; and second, shifts in political approach leave them confused as to goals and objectives. As far as the U.S. and NATO are concerned, one of the lessons they may have drawn from the Soviet period is that it is dangerous to give heavy weapons to an unstable army in an unstable situation. It is still unclear where the U.S. Stinger missiles went after the Soviet withdrawal, and the thousands of Kalashnikovs that the Soviets left

behind were mutated into AK 47s. At the same time it is impossible to expect the ANA to be the first line of defense while being unwilling to give them heavy weapons. Moreover, the ANA are suffering huge casualties but not wilting. “The Soviets dealt with an illiterate rank and file, today most of them are educated,” comments a Russian security analyst. “They are moving towards becoming a professional army. But there is an asymmetry in favor of the armed opposition.”

The current costs of supporting the ANDSF are USD 5.5 billion, of which USD 500 million is covered by the Afghan government. The U.S. is looking for other donors, and President Obama asked China to put troops into Afghanistan, but neither China nor India or Russia are likely to do so. However, all three will help the ANDSF as and when requested; India will continue its military training program and China may expand beyond the police assistance they are giving. The Chinese government is considering the ANDSF request for helicopters.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Rapprochement

The greatest differences of views emerged on the prognosis for Afghan-Pakistani rapprochement. Chinese analysts believe that the Pakistani government and military are changing their approach to Afghanistan, though they think there is some difference in Pakistani political will regarding the Waziristan operation. Both General Raheel Sharif and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif have made high profile visits to Afghanistan and their promise to cooperate is sincere, they say. President Ghani’s initiatives - the joint operation with Pakistan against the TTP after the Peshawar attack, preferential treatment for Pakistani businesses - were important CBMs and the ‘intelligence- sharing agreement’ between Afghanistan and Pakistan is extremely promising in the Chinese view. They also believe it is wrong to be suspicious about rapprochement between the two countries, preferring to judge by concrete results.

For its part, they say, the Chinese government is cautiously optimistic. They hope that the Taliban will not only talk but also participate in elections. They see their own role as facilitators, putting the two sides at the table. Two obstacles that they identify are: (a) whether Pakistan has sufficient control over the Taliban to deliver on substantive talks; and (b) whether the NUGA can approach the talks from a position of achievement. “The Taliban are ambitious and if they see this government as weak and vacillating they will continue to push,” they say, adding that the Afghan government and the international community should take the Taliban’s negotiating strength as part of policy. The Afghan government, they suggest, should offer “additional incentives for the Taliban, for example, to encourage those of them who want to negotiate and join the political process. There cannot be a genuine reconciliation process without the Taliban – the moderates among them must be involved.”

Pakistan and Afghanistan have a mutual interest in countering terrorism, they add. But just as Afghans are divided on rapprochement with Pakistan, Pakistan too has to develop a consensus on cooperating with the Afghan government.

“China’s approach to using its influence is different from the U.S. approach,” says one analyst. “China wants to exert its influence in a thoughtful way, convincing Islamabad that to play a more cooperative and constructive role in the Afghan reconciliation is in its own interests. Beijing realizes that Pakistan’s reasonable demands in Afghanistan need to be met to gather Islamabad’s coherent support and sincere cooperation.” The analyst further argues, “Pakistan’s claim of securing its strategic depth in Afghanistan is not beyond understanding in terms of its geopolitical rationale.”

To Indian analysts these comments are outrageous. Pakistan’s strategic depth doctrine targets India and seeks to draw Afghanistan into India-Pakistan conflict, both of which are unacceptable. “Can China play a responsible role for peace and stabilization of Afghanistan if this is their approach?”, an Indian analyst wonders.

Russian and Indian analysts are also more skeptical than China on the prospects for Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement. Both question the civil-military relationship, and some question even the army-ISI relationship. A Russian analyst comments, “the problem for Pakistan is that even if both Sharifs jointly ask the ISI to control the Taliban and other jihadis, the ISI won’t obey.” Indeed, the nature of ISI control is also complicated, Russian analysts agree: “Pakistan controls the top and mid-level leadership of the Taliban but not the field commanders. Some leaders are Afghan nationalists and this is an additional problem for Pakistan.” The ISI may be able to divide and rule the Taliban but whether they can help them unify for peace is another matter.

In the meantime, the Taliban’s conditions for talks have not changed: they say that the Preamble of the Afghan Constitution is acceptable, but the rest will need amendment. They seek a new interim government to replace the NUGA and full withdrawal of U.S. troops, after which they will consider signing a peace agreement. Even this is moot: following the Afghan government-Taliban meeting in Murree, Pakistan, field commanders started asking where Mullah Omar is, and for him to show himself.

Indian, Russian and Chinese analysts also agree that Pakistan is in a very vulnerable state. “The focus of economic and social development is still Punjab,” says one Russian analyst. “Today the Prime Minister and Army Chief are both from Punjab. The crescent of militancy and instability runs from Karachi to rural

Three weeks after the trilateral, the Afghan Government announced that Mullah Omar was dead and had died in 2013. Currently there is a power struggle within the Taliban – Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was declared the new Taliban leader but his ascendancy is being questioned and the head of the Qatar office’s political committee, Tayyeb Agha, has resigned.

Sindh to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. From the humanitarian point of view there are very great hardships in Pakistan. How can Pakistan deal with this? The only force is the Pakistan army. Some cooperation between Rawalpindi and Islamabad is the only solution, so we must hope that the present Army-Sharif compromise will hold.”

Other Russian analysts point to the expediency of the intelligence-sharing MOU between Afghanistan and Pakistan. “President Ghani has no other way, but he too knows how risky it is,” they say. The role of China and the U.S. will be very important in continually pushing Pakistan to deliver.”

On the plus side, there are civil society initiatives at bridge building in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, for example through organizing summer schools to discuss cross border reconciliation, and students from tribal areas such as Chitral want to study in India, Russia and China. Pakistani civil society supports the Pakistan National Action Plan against terrorism. Though these are straws, in the opinion of one Russian analyst they indicate that there is potential for the arc of the problem – Xinjiang, FATA, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Altai – to be transformed into an arc of cooperation. Others warn that the situation in Pakistan is even more unpredictable than in Afghanistan, given the range of Pakistani support for extremists.

Overall, most participants felt there was more scope for Afghan government-Taliban rapprochement than for Afghanistan-Pakistan rapprochement. “The Taliban don’t think of a Caliphate now,” says a Russian analyst. “The task is to speed up reconciliation by encouraging contacts between the Taliban and Afghanistan government; we must prevent the IS from gaining ground in Afghanistan. The Gulf countries may have their own interest in Afghanistan but they have contacts with the Taliban and could help. The Afghan government could convene a conference on Afghanistan that would include the Taliban, government representatives and other ethnic groups. Regional and international actors could help Afghanistan to convene such a conference. India, Russia and China should increase contacts with the Taliban.”

The Daesh Threat

The Islamic State (IS), or Daesh as they are called in Persian and Arabic, emerged in Afghanistan in August 2014 and have reportedly grown quite strong. They initially wanted to enforce their power over the Taliban by killing some of their commanders, but they were repulsed and now have changed tactics. They also tried to impose Wahhabism but ran into problems with Afghan tribal elders and failed.

Russian analysts see the emerging threat of IS in Afghanistan as ‘Priority Number One’. According to them Afghanistan is a fertile field for IS recruitment and the IS will recruit in Afghanistan because they don’t have an endless supply of fighters. The IS has active cells in 25 out of 43 provinces, they say, and are overtaking the Taliban. There are ten IS training centers in Northern Afghanistan – in Farah, Loghar and Uruzgan, for example. Ghazni was the first province in which IS established itself, but now there are six more in Northern Afghanistan. “In the beginning the IS fighters were Arabs, but they lured the younger generation of the Taliban with money, they have a passion to fight,” says one Russian analyst. “They are able to pay USD 300-700 according to skill.” Today there are few foreign fighters in the IS in Afghanistan, and those that are there are in positions of command. Russian analysts

estimate that there are 6,000 Afghan IS in Afghanistan, and say the numbers are growing every day. Their chief target remains the Taliban though their goals vary: the attacks in Nangarhar, for example, were to get control over drug trafficking. "The old guard of the Taliban are very frightened," a Russian analyst comments. "Analysts predict that by next year the Taliban will disappear. This may make the Taliban more amenable to talks."

The Daesh threat is most direct for Russia and Central Asia. While Indians have been kidnapped by IS in Iraq and Libya, neither India nor China face the threat directly within their own countries as yet (though a small number of IS supporters have emerged in India). However, according to Russian analysts, IS is recruiting Central Asians, Caucasus Russians and Tatars in six or seven of their training centers, where the language of training is Russian. Uighurs too are being recruited, they say. The Chinese government are concerned about IS but only in relation to Xinjiang. They believe they can control Xinjiang so long as it can be isolated.

The IS focus on Afghanistan, Russian analysts argue, is as the gateway to Central Asia. This is why they have built up in Badakhshan and Kunduz, with 5-8,000 fighters, and at the Tajikistan border. In the Russian view, Turkmenistan is most vulnerable to an IS assault from across the border: Tajikistan has an army which has experienced combat and should be able to repulse IS, they say, but the same does not hold true for Turkmenistan. Daesh already controls some of the border posts, they add.

There are two types of Daesh in Afghanistan, they continue: the faction building up in North-West Afghanistan call themselves the Emirate of Khorasan. Their leader was earlier with the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). They are said to have sponsors in Qatar who oppose the TAPI pipeline because it would undercut their companies. The second faction is made up of Afghans who were recruited by Turkey to fight in Syria: some have returned to join IS in Afghanistan. The second faction is said to have funders in Saudi Arabia. Though Iran has also recruited fighters against Daesh in Syria, from amongst Afghan refugees, any who return would join the fight against IS in Afghanistan, not with them.

Russian analysts believe that India and China should be more proactive against IS. Iran too, they say, would be an active member of a coalition against IS.

Deradicalization

On the wider and more long-term issue of deradicalization, while analysts from all three countries agreed on the need for global initiatives to counter extremist outreach, their experiences have been different. One view is that militancy was best countered with development and education. Another is that a transformation approach would be more useful, taking the clergy on board. A point that did come through clearly was the need to distinguish Indian Deoband from Pakistani 'Deoband'. The former have not only remained largely apolitical, they have spearheaded a fatwa movement against terrorism. Pakistani Deoband, actually the Jamiat e Ulema e Islam of Samiul Haq and Fazlur Rahman, was founded in the

1860's in Deoband, but at partition moved to Pakistan. Whether they can today affix the name of Deoband to their ideology is questionable.

India–Russia–China

India, Russia and China have a common interest in the stabilization of the Afghanistan-Pakistan and Central Asia regions as well as in countering extremism, narcotics and terrorist funding. They are also divided, however. With U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia over Ukraine, there is little political dialogue on Afghanistan between the U.S., EU and Russia, whereas China has a close dialogue on Afghanistan with the U.S., and India too discusses options for Afghanistan with the U.S. and EU. India and China, on the other hand, have a very limited dialogue on Afghanistan, constrained by the China-Pakistan relationship, while Russia has a close dialogue on Afghanistan and Pakistan with China.

How important are these divergences? What can the three countries do together to help Afghanistan's quest for peace and sovereignty?

India, Russia and China have had an ongoing trilateral at Foreign Minister level since 2002. Though it took some time to get going, the three countries' Foreign Ministers meet twice a year, and their National Security Advisors meet regularly. Though Afghanistan is an agenda item in these meetings, it is not discussed at the level of common policy formulation.

Russian analysts argue that the three big regional powers can do a great deal if they focus on the need to restore Afghanistan as a state and as a nation. For a start, they say, Indian, Russian and Chinese government representatives need to identify the political leaders, organizations and constituencies in Afghanistan that can deliver on state and nation building and help strengthen them. Moreover, they add, "China and India need to step up cooperation in order to enable Afghanistan to play the role of a classic buffer zone."

With India and Pakistan set to join the SCO, further opportunities for cooperation have opened, though not without complications. Border cooperation and counter-terrorism are both high on the SCO agenda. Founded in 2001 to coordinate efforts to fight "terrorism, religious extremism and separatism" in Central Asia, the SCO conducts joint military drills called Peace Missions with a counter-terrorism focus, and SCO member-states have established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (making the unfortunate acronym RATS) with offices in each member-state. RATS provides a forum for member-states' counter-terrorism agencies to meet and facilitates intelligence sharing in the form of a joint database and blacklists of individuals and groups linked to terrorism.

Though the structure for cooperation exists, progress has been slow. SCO member-states have had periodic border cooperation exercises, mostly between China and Russia starting in 2007. SCO members also participated as observers in joint counter-terrorism exercises between China and North Korea in 2013. However, few collective exercises of all SCO member-states have taken place. While Russia and China, whose joint military exercises have expanded considerably, have

found they led to productive confidence-building outcomes, it is unlikely that SCO member-states will hold collective exercises, though such a step might cool tensions between many of the SCO members.

Counter-terrorism cooperation is another thorny issue. With India and Pakistan set to join, and soon Iran and Afghanistan too, Russian and Chinese analysts suggest that RATS would be well-positioned to bring substance to the SCO's counter-terrorism efforts. However, SCO member-states also have concerns: what will be the fallout of India- Pakistan tensions for cooperation against terrorism? It is unlikely that Pakistan would share intelligence against India- focused militants; indeed, there appears to be considerable Pakistani reluctance to act against Afghanistan-focused militants even though both the Pakistan army and the civilian government have pledged to do so.

In 2005 the SCO set up an Afghanistan Contact Group, which was to coordinate closer cooperation between SCO member-states and Afghanistan. Now that India and Pakistan are set to join and Iran will soon also join, all of Afghanistan's neighbors will be SCO members. The Contact Group has not been effective as yet, though there are proposals that it coordinate member-states' activities with Afghanistan, which is currently an Observer at the SCO, beginning with:

- Development and economic cooperation;
- Counter-narcotics;
- Misuse of internet and social media;
- and
- Insecurity on their borders and in border areas.

There is also an ongoing discussion about SCO-CSTO cooperation on joint military exercises for border security. The chief purpose of such joint exercises would be counter-terrorism.

The Chinese Government are also interested in security coordination with the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was founded by Kazakhstan and is currently under Chinese Chairmanship. India, Russia and China are all members of CICA.

Two other issues on the SCO agenda are cyber security and the prevention of proliferation of nuclear weapons, including the threat of nuclear terrorism.

There will also be overlaps between SCO & BRICS following the SCO's new economic agenda, adopted at the Dushanbe summit, which will need to either be coordinated or removed.

OBOR, EAEU, CPEC and INSTC

Along with other international actors, India, Russia and China recognize that the NUGA desperately needs economic aid for Afghanistan. President Ghani's focus is on developing the conditions for Afghanistan to move towards a self-sustaining economy, but for this to happen Afghanistan needs a regional economic infrastructure to integrate with. Over the past ten years several initiatives towards regional economic integration have been launched; though an overarching grand

design has not yet been agreed, sub- projects for connectivity such as CASA-1000 are underway.

The SCO could play a role in aiding this process. At the Dushanbe SCO Summit in 2014, new economic agreements and/or guidelines were agreed. In the follow-up at the Ufa Summit of July

2015, the potential for China's 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) to link up with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was on the agenda. The EAEU is a customs union comprising Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Evolving out of its predecessor, the Customs Union, the initiative aims to deepen and maximize trade between its members by providing for free movement of goods, services, labor and capital, and by harmonizing economic policy in specifically defined sectors. The EAEU has the potential to expand, with Turkey and Tajikistan mooted as possible entrants in the future, and though it is a nascent institution, it represents progress in a region that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, is markedly poorly integrated. Should EAEU and OBOR link, the EAEU would bring ease for transportation through already established freedom of movement between its member-states. However, China has already built an energy and transport infrastructure in many of the Central Asian Republics, linking them to its East-West Silk Road initiative that preceded OBOR. Whether OBOR will link this infrastructure to Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia is unclear, since no details on OBOR are currently available. "Originally China had marginalized Afghanistan, but now China's approach has changed," says a Chinese analyst. "China supports the idea of Afghanistan playing a central role in regional connectivity." Afghanistan is officially listed among the countries that have signed onto OBOR, according to the OBOR Action Plan that Beijing released in March 2015. Nevertheless doubts persist. "The Russian market could be a destination for Afghanistan but the question of logistics is critical. Will we be able to use the infrastructure developed?", asks one Russian analyst.

For India, OBOR is both an opportunity and a problem. If it links to India through the western route, it will provide access to Central Asia and Europe as well as China. China argues that there is already an eastern link to India planned through the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, but this of course does not solve India's north-western access problem which is blocked by Pakistan. Moreover, the grand designs for regional economic integration mooted by policy analysts envisages three large economies as anchors: India, Russia and China, but OBOR seems to militate against this. Indeed, the most recent attempted addition to OBOR, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) not only ensures that OBOR stops at Pakistan's border with India, it also goes through territory which is claimed by India, in Pakistani-held Kashmir (the Gilgit- Baltistan region).

India's Prime Minister Modi has conveyed Indian objections to this aspect of CPEC to Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, and it is hoped that India will soon be included in discussion on it. Concerning OBOR, the problem is complicated since Pakistan has steadfastly refused to extend the Afghanistan transit trade agreement to India.

China's ability to influence Pakistan is limited, as Chinese analysts point out, especially when it comes to India, but according to one Chinese analyst, "China takes India feedback very seriously, and should rethink its strategy." Moreover, given that almost all the regional and international actors for Afghan stabilization agree that access to India is important for economic integration, the potential for the SCO to persuade Pakistan to reconsider is considerable.

India is already working on bypassing the problem by connecting to Afghanistan as well as Central Asia through Iran, and is investing USD 85 million in Iran's Chabahar port. India, Iran and Russia are also reinvigorating an inter-governmental agreement signed in September 2000, to develop an International North- South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which would connect India to Russia and Europe through Iran. The INSTC covered road, rail, sea and air transport, and pledged to develop infrastructure in all sectors. The project envisages a multimodal trans-Caspian route with an eastern branch. Today 45 countries have signed onto the project and a trial run has been conducted for feasibility, but it has thus far been held up by political considerations. "The INSTC will connect large markets and reduce transit time by as much as two-thirds, but there is need for greater cooperation between regional states to push it forward," an Iranian government representative said. There are existing railroad connections to support the corridor, with only limited additional construction work required to complete the links. The Russia-Iran leg of the INSTC has already been completed, but the Iran-India leg remains to be constructed. An estimated USD 500 million-1 billion would be required to finance the infrastructure needed for completion of the INSTC. The Indian Government has now taken the initiative with Iran on this leg of the INSTC.

While China does not require the INSTC, and the INSTC is independent of OBOR, if the two connect in a hub and spoke model it would be a CBM of considerable impact for the region. "Russia-India- China cooperation will send a good signal to other SCO members. SCO cooperation on energy and the setting up of an SCO Free Trade Zone should be a priority," a former SCO official comments.

Indian, Russian and Chinese analysts also discussed more ambitious plans that their three governments started exploring in 2014, for an energy corridor from Russia's Western Siberia through Altai to China's Xinjiang and from there to India. Given the complexity of Altai's ecosystem, alternatives through Kazakhstan are also being looked at. The project would traverse high mountainous areas and would cost between USD 30-40 billion. While the cost may not be a deterrent - with the emergence of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, there is ample scope for extensive funding of regional connectivity initiatives - the three countries have yet to look more closely at feasibility.

Ambitious as it is, the project could get a fillip through Russia's push for a common SCO transport system that could connect its Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline with the Silk Road. Russia is promoting the development of a road transport network spanning from Europe to Western China and which would link up Yellow Sea ports with ports in the Leningrad Oblast.

In sum, there are a number of both feasible and productive options for the three countries to work together to transform the regional economies of Central and South Asia.

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