



## **RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS INDIA UNDER PUTIN'S FIRST REGIME: 2000- 2008**

**Sant Prakash Singh**

*CRCAS/ SIS, JNU, New Delhi- 110067.*



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### **Introduction**

Two kinds of shifts have been taken place in the realm of foreign policy of Russia in the Post Soviet period. The first major shift took place under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, whose Foreign Minister effected the shift by making the foreign policy pro-West. The other shift took place once Vladimir Putin took over as President in year 2000, and this shift saw some reversals of the foreign policies that had propounded and assiduously pursued by Yeltsin administration. There have been two kinds of explanations for the shift that took place at the turn of the century, at the time of ascendance of Putin to the Presidentship. One explanation says that Putin administration abandoned the pro-West foreign policy because Russia's attempt to integrate itself with the West had been completely frustrated by indifference shown by the West, particularly US. The other explanation has been that the shift actually took place out of pragmatic considerations, rather than out of frustration over failure to convince the West.

In the context of this shift, the thing that is worthy of notice is that Russia's foreign policy saw some modifications and changes in its policy towards India at the time of both shifts that have taken place in the Post-Soviet period. In the popular perceptions, the shift that took place in the beginning of 1990s under Yeltsin, pushed down India in the list of priorities of Russian Foreign Policy, while the Putin's first period saw the resurgence of Russia's interest in its traditional friend India.

This period will analyse, to what extent the two explanations that have been offered for the shift in Russia's foreign policy at the turn of the century actually account for change in approach towards India at that time. Is it the frustration over the failure of earlier attempts to integrate with the West, that drove the Putin administration to reverse the policies towards

India of Yeltsin administration, or do the reasons for reversal lie in well thought out strategy? For analysing the reasons for the reversal that took place during Putin's first regime, it is important to briefly discuss the changes brought in a broad approach towards India, by the Yeltsin administration in the beginning of 1990s.

### **Yeltsin's Approach towards India**

Gidadhubli has discussed the nuances of changes in Russia's foreign policy towards India during Yeltsin administration, and brings attention to the factors that influenced Yeltsin's approach towards India. According to him, India did go down in the priority list of Russia's foreign policy, and there were basically two reasons for it. The first reason lay in Yeltsin's euphoria over the West, and in this context, Gidadhubli has appropriately mentioned that Yeltsin's Euphoria over West was possibly guided a desire to see Russia accepted overnight by the Western countries as an emerging democratic country. The other reason lay in the fact that Russian policy makers now wanted to follow a pragmatic approach, which said that with the Cold War over, there was no logic in extending special treatment to India, which the latter had enjoyed during the Cold War period.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the reflections of this shift were later seen its approach towards Pakistan. Azizian and Vasilieff, who have written on Pakistan -Russia relations, opine that there was some thaw in Pakistan -Russia relations after the disintegration of USSR, but it lasted only till 1993, because by that time Russia had again started recalling its days of traditional friendship with India. However, even that short period of thaw saw some unprecedented things. For, instance, Moscow supported Pakistan's proposal for nuclear free South -Asia , and Foreign Minister Kozyrev , during his visit to Islamabad in April 1993, stated that both sides , and not only Pakistan , should respect human rights in Kashmir. <sup>2</sup>

But was this change reflected in its foreign policy towards India at the practical level. Jyotsna has written that India's action of conducting nuclear test in 1998 created a situation of dilemma for Russia, and the result of this dilemma was that while the then foreign minister Kozyrev was explicitly critical of India's tests, the media was not, and then there was business as usual attitude at practical level. <sup>3</sup>

However, it is not right to characterise the Yeltsin period as a period of complete chill between India and Russia. In the opinion of Jain, there was confusion initially in the Post

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1Gidadhubli, R. G. (1995), "Russia's Economic Relations with Asia", *Economic and Political Weekly*, p.1424-1427.

2Azizian, Rouben and Vasilieff, Peter (2003), "Russia and Pakistan: The Difficult Path to Rapprochement", *Asian Affairs*, p.37.

3Bakshi, Jyotsna(1998), "Russia's Post-Pokhran Dilemma", *Strategic Analysis*, p. 721- 736.

Soviet period because of Kozyrev's Euro-centric approach and India's inability to adapt to the collapse of Soviet Union at that time. This confusion began to get removed once President Yeltsin visited India in January 1993, and recalled the traditional Indo- Russian Friendship. Jain believes that Yeltsin's action was a departure from the Euro- centric approach of Kozyrev-Gaidar circle, and this departure was manifested in Yeltsin's assurance to the then Indian Defense Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav that Russia was ready to give everything that India needed for its defense and security.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Yeltsin's period initially saw some changes in its policy towards India, but they were reversed to a large extent in the latter half of his time. Coincidentally, in the latter half , Kozyrev , who had championed the agenda of reintegrating Russia with West , was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov. The former's policy was also discredited. Pandey opines that identity factor has been a strong determinant in foreign policy of Russia, and Kozyrev's Euro-centrism was a reflection of Russia's attempt to identify itself with the West, and it was latter's indifference that was partly responsible for an about turn of pro-West policy.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Putin's policy towards India**

In the popular perceptions, Putin is an assertive, charming leader, who brought about reversals in the realm of foreign policy. His 1<sup>st</sup> regime has been categorised as a period of reassertion of Russia on world stage, and so his period has been seen as departure from that of his predecessor. However, the nuances of the document that he signed and approved in 2000, Foreign Policy Concept. The document shows an awareness of need to meet economic security needs. It says- "*The main priority in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in international economic relations is to promote the development of the national economy, which, in conditions of globalization, is unthinkable without broad integration of Russia in the system of world economic ties.*" And while talking about regional priorities, it has laid lot of emphasis on developing friendly relations with both India and China.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, there are two things that are visible in document, and that is a great importance of both China and India. The paper does not talk about China's economic rise, or India's fabulous growth, but the presence of two things – economic interest, and a need to develop friendly ties with the two countries, especially at a time when they are growing, reflect an angle of economic security in Russia's desire to develop friendly relations with these two countries. To what extent Russia under Putin , was able to further its interests that emanate

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4 Jain, B.M. (2003), "India and Russia: Reassessing the Time-Tested Ties", *Pacific Affairs*, p. 375-397.

5 Pandey, Sanjay Kumar (2007), "Asia in the Debate on Russian Identity", *International Studies*, p.317-37.

6 *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, June 28, 2000.

from its economic security needs , can be debated , but Putin's mind was clearer in the beginning itself , on what to do with its relation with its traditional friend- India. The confusion that characterised his predecessors period was absent in his 1<sup>st</sup> period.

### **Nuclear Issue**

In February 2001, for example, Russia shipped 58 tons of low enriched uranium (LEU) fuel to power two U.S.-built 210 MW boiling water reactors at Tarapur, in India's state of Maharashtra. The shipment triggered a strong negative reaction from the NSG, and the United States offered up the harshest condemnation. In a January 2007 statement, Rosatom head Kiriienko summed up Moscow's position, "Russia believes that India has an unimpeachable reputation in the nuclear nonproliferation sphere."<sup>7</sup> Putin also extended whole hearted support to India's civil nuclear program by sealing an agreement to build four new reactors in Kudankulam, in Tamil Nadu in January 2007.<sup>8</sup> And it is known by now that the Russians extended unequivocal support to India in NSG. Therefore, where civil nuclear issue is concerned, India has seen ample support from Russia during Putin's tenure.

However, one should not conclude that the Putin's policy on support to India's civil nuclear program was a sort of departure from his predecessor's policy. It has already been mentioned before in this paper that Yeltsin did modify his approach towards India, but in the latter half of his tenure, there were some reversals of the changes that he himself had brought. And so, when India conducted nuclear test , the Russian reaction was a little muted . Rather, Mr Yeltsin underlined the positive changes in Russia's relations with India and China and kept his schedule of visiting India that year unchanged.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, as far as nuclear issue is concerned, Putin's 1<sup>st</sup> regime saw a continuation of his predecessor's policy.

### **Russia-China-India Triangle**

The originator of this idea was Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who floated this idea in New Delhi, and Beijing, but it was not received with lot of enthusiasm, at that time. The reasons for that are many – irritants in Sino-Indian ties due to border disputes, and Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> The Putin administration did not abandon the idea of carrying forward efforts to forge the trilateral framework. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov forcefully pushed this idea in February

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<sup>7</sup> Eager to Increase Nuclear Exports, Russia Awaits Nuclear Suppliers Group Exemption for India, February 2008 Issue. URL: [http://www.wmdinsights.com/122/122\\_RU3\\_EagerToIncrease.htm](http://www.wmdinsights.com/122/122_RU3_EagerToIncrease.htm).

<sup>8</sup> India Russia to sign 10 agreements during Putin's visit this week, Pratyush | Jan 23 2007.

URL:<http://www.indiadaily.org/entry/india-russia-to-sign-10-agreements-during-putins-visit-this-week/>.

<sup>9</sup> International Support for India : The Russian View, URL: [http://india\\_resource.tripod.com/support.html](http://india_resource.tripod.com/support.html).

<sup>10</sup> Pant, Harsh V.(2006)'Feasibility of Russia-China-India "Strategic Triangle": Assessment of Theoretical and Empirical Issues', p. 55.

2002, while visiting New Delhi.<sup>11</sup> Bhattacharya opines that the proponents of this triangle tried to reduce the anti-US content of this framework in the post 9/11 world, because all three countries sensed the dangers from the splitist sections in their country - Chechnya, Kashmir, Xinjiang, but the anti-US tone remained.<sup>12</sup>

India's response to any trilateral framework of the sort that Primakov had envisaged was basically lukewarm. One reason, apart from the mutual suspicions between India and China, was India's warming up to US. Therefore, even though Putin, even on this front, continued with the idea of the preceding administration, the idea actually did not fully take off.

### **India's presence in Central Asia**

India has a presence in Central Asia, which has been coveted by many powers. There is an air base near Dushanbe, in Tajikistan. India is involved in the construction of three hangars there. After the fall of the Taliban regime, India was determined not to lose the foothold it had gained in Afghanistan thanks to its ties with the Northern Alliance in the late 1990s. Delhi was anxious not to allow Pakistani influence to grow again in Afghanistan. This was behind India's decision to remain at Ayni after the fall of the Taliban, say Indian intelligence sources. A military base in Tajikistan is attractive as it also enhances India's options in the event of war with Pakistan. From Tajikistan, India would be able to strike Pakistan's rear.<sup>13</sup> India is also involved in developmental work in Afghanistan. India is involved in building a highway from Zaranj to Delaram, a project which has often attracted the wrath of Taliban elements.<sup>14</sup> Russia's foreign policy, during Putin 1<sup>st</sup> regime, did not show any kind of displeasure over India's involvement in Central Asia, a region, which Russia regards as an area of influence. Mohanty writes - "We have a large commonality of interests with Russia in Central Asia. Russia does not perceive a threat to its interests from a growing Indian presence in Central Asia"<sup>15</sup> Akbarzadeh holds a similar view. In his opinion, the common interests were reflected in the July 2002 meeting of the Indo-Russia Joint Working Group in New Delhi, which emphasised the shared view that the American presence in Afghanistan and its northern

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11 Akbarzadeh, Shahram (2003), "India and Pakistan's geostrategic rivalry in Central Asia", *Contemporary South Asia*, p. 225.

12 Bhattacharya, Abanti (2004), "The Fallacy in the Russia-India-China Triangle", *Strategic Analysis*, Volume: 28, Issue: 2, Commentaries: April 2004.

13 Ramachandran, Sudha, 'India's foray into Central Asia', URL: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/HH12Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/HH12Df01.html)

14 Ramachandran, Sudha, 'India takes a slow road', URL: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/IA27Df04.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/IA27Df04.html).

15 Mohanty, Arun (2009) 'India needs a stronger Partnership with Russia in the Emerging Multipolar World', *Mainstream*, 47(51): URL: <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1807.html>.

neighbours is justified within the parameters of the 'war on terror' - the hint was that once the objective had been achieved, there would be no further justification for a US military presence.<sup>16</sup>

### **North-South Corridor Project**

One of the most ambitious project that was started during Putin's 1<sup>st</sup> regime, in which India and Russia both were involved was the beginning of North-South Corridor Project. This is a transport project which seeks to establish a transport corridor, stretching from ports in India across the Arabian Sea to the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, where goods then transit Iran and the Caspian Sea to ports in Russia's sector of the Caspian.<sup>17</sup> This project reflects what the Foreign Policy Concept 2000 has mentioned – pursuing the interests of the national economy in foreign policy. It also dispels the common notion that Russia has always regarded India as a strategic partner, in a military sense.

### **Kashmir issue**

Putin's policy on Kashmir has been supportive of India. In the year 2000, during his visit to India, he spelt out that India was as much a victim of international terrorism as Russia was in Chechnya, and that there should not be any external interference in Kashmir. Referring to global terrorism, he said that it was often the same individuals, and same terrorist organisations who were conducting terrorist acts from the Philippines to Kosovo, including Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Russia's Northern Caucasus.<sup>18</sup> Following the December 13 attack on Indian Parliament, when tensions rose between India and Pakistan, Putin called for restraint, and attempted to reduce the tensions between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Is frustration over failure to integrate with the West a factor in reversal of approach towards India, during Putin's time?***

Firstly, it would not be very correct to attribute a complete reversal in the realm of foreign policy to Putin., because the paper has at various places mentioned that the reversals of the approach that Yeltsin had begun soon after the disintegration took place during his time, and the chill in the relation between Russia and India did not remain for long. Rather, Putin has continued some of the policies of his predecessors, like in case of civil nuclear program, and

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16 Akbarzadeh, Shahram (2003), " India and Pakistan's geostrategic rivalry in Central Asia", *Contemporary South Asia*, p. 225.

17 Spector, Regine A. (2002), *The North-South Transport Corridor*. URL: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/165>.

18 'Putin against Foreign interference in Kashmir, 4 October, The Hindu. URL: <http://www.jammu-kashmir.com/archives/archives2000/kashmir20001004a.html>

19 'Putin persists with Kashmir Diplomacy', 4 June , 2002, BBC News, World Edition , URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2025010.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2025010.stm)

Russia-China-India triangle. The difference lies in the fact that Putin's period did not have the confusion of the sort that Yeltsin's period had.

Secondly, as far as question of frustration over failure to integrate with the West is concerned, Putin's approach actually did not reflect any frustration of this sort. Rather, he took a pragmatic line based on national interest. In this context, Andrei P. Tsygankov says, "In his response to a new foreign policy context, Putin sought to reaffirm Russia's commitment to European values. In his speech delivered to the Federation Council in April 2005, Putin declared that he saw Russia moving towards the same values shared by others in the European continent : "the ideals of freedom , human rights , justice , and democracy.""<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Putin's foreign policy towards India during first regime saw consolidation of the policies followed by his predecessor in the dusk years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However his policy was not bedeviled with the confusion that had marked the foreign policy towards India in the initial years of the 1990s decades. Therefore, it is not appropriate to attribute an about turn in Russia's policy towards India to Putin's first period. Secondly it is wrong to correlate Russia's failure to integrate with the West and policy towards India because Putin's policy was full of pragmatism based on national interest, which is reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept document that he signed and approved in 2000.

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<sup>20</sup> Tsygankov, Andrei P., "Russia's Foreign Policy", p. 226.

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