

Russia-India-China strategic triangle:

Signalling a power shift?

SWARAN SINGH

THE 11th round of the Russia-India-China (RIC) Foreign Minister's meet was held in Moscow on April 13.

Prima facie, this impressive continuity in the Ministers' annual parleys has gathered sufficient mass and momentum which makes this forum appear pregnant with the potential for global and systemic implications for the 21st century world order. Closer home, these cordial trilateral meetings have also generated positive vibes amongst the three foreign ministers, which gets reflected in their often rather soft responses in bilateral relations that have otherwise witnessed their own share of turbulences and irritants.

At the most visible level, the Moscow meeting of the RIC Foreign Ministers took place on the eve of two important international initiatives, and it seemed to have influenced their outcomes. The first was the UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting in response to the satellite launch by Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the second was the Istanbul initiative on the continued crisis over the Iranian nuclear issue; the latter involved representatives from Iran, Germany and the Permanent Five members (P5) of the UNSC. Both these issues were discussed in detail by the RIC Foreign Ministers and their joint communiqué outlined their proposed strategies that seemed so directed towards these two aforementioned follow-up meetings.

The rocket launch by DPRK appeared to overshadow the RIC foreign Ministers' press briefing and the follow-up banner headlines in next morning's newspapers. The three Foreign Ministers expressed their 'regret' over this decision of the DPRK but, at the same time, cautioned against sanctions as the primary methodology to deal with this crisis. Instead, they called for 'restraint', especially on the part of DPRK's neighbouring countries. The goal, they said, should not

be to launch sanctions that will punish innocent people, but to get the new regime in Pyongyang to participate in Six Party Talks. This implied that the RIC Foreign Ministers were suggesting that Pyongyang be co-opted and socialized. They actually went a step further and "recognized" DPRK's right to pursue space explorations and advised it to avoid escalation. The Ministers exhorted Pyongyang to explore possibilities on how it would expand its cooperation with the United Nations to overcome its limitations in pursuing research and development initiatives.

These views stood clearly at large variance to those expressed by US President Obama, who stressed on isolating Pyongyang as way to deal with, according to him, DPRK's defiance of the so-called international community. In one voice, the US and its allies condemned DPRK's rocket test as "provocative" and "threatening" to regional security. This was followed by the UN Secretary General describing the launch as "deplorable" and one that "defies the firm and unanimous stance of the international community." The RIC Foreign Ministers' joint communiqué, on the other hand, provided a strong reminder of two veto wielding members of UNSCRussia and Chinaholding strong positions against sanctions, let alone slapping trade embargoes or military action, which have become popular in media commentaries since the regime change in Libya. Similarly on the Iran issue, RIC have

repeatedly endorsed Iran's sovereign right to peaceful nuclear energy and have argued for resolving this issue through political and diplomatic dialogue, including between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). On the eve of last week's Istanbul meeting amongst representatives of Iran, Germany and the P5 of the UNSC, the RIC Foreign Ministers' in Moscow once

stability in Afghanistan and reaffirmed their readiness to contribute to it within the UN framework or via other regional initiatives, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), whose members and observers have direct stakes in Afghan peace.

Similarly, the RIC Ministers' joint communiqué also underlined the necessity of acting against the perpetrators of terrorism as well as against their sponsors and supporters. This was clearly an allusion to Pakistan and the instance of India asking for action against the masterminds of 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack. Beijing has also claimed that terrorists of East Turkistan Movement find allegiance there. Some of these issues were also discussed in bilateral meetings, which provided useful links in wake of the recent, rather assertive posturing of China on the issue of oil explorations in the South China Sea, off the Vietnam Coast. Both Russian and Indian oil companies are involved in prospecting in the area in spite of repeated Chinese objections. It is also important to note that this was perhaps the last RIC meeting by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi who is due to retire before the end of this year.

Finally, the momentum of the RIC Foreign Ministers' Moscow meet was strengthened as it was held barely a fortnight after the BRICS Summit in New Delhi (besides India, China and Russia, the Summit included Brazil and South Africa). At the BRICS Summit, the three countries had taken simi-



Foreign Ministers of China, Russia and India (from left) Yang Jiechi, Sergei Lavrov and S.M. Krishna at a trilateral meeting in Moscow on April 13, 2012.

again echoed their position. The RIC joint communiqué also reiterated their concerns on Afghanistan, where increasing focus on the exit of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has made China, India and Russia focus both as countries with major post-ISAF-exit responsibilities as also major victims of terrorism. The joint communiqué devotes several paragraphs that underline their commitment to seeking

lar, strong collective positions on the issues of the Iranian nuclear standoff and the Syrian crisis. These back-to-back fora, reflecting a collective stand by RIC and its visible restraining influence on how the US and its allies approach these issues, allude to the slow, subtle shift of the balance of global power towards regional powers. It must be noted here that this shift may not sustain over time or may face certain hiccups if the agenda of the grouping were to be expanded. The growing bonhomie amongst RIC is clearly visible in various other fora, from the United Nations to the G-20, SCO, Asia-Europe Meetings, Climate Change COPs, East Asian Summits, and so on. Conversely, this increasing assertiveness of alternative RIC strategies is becoming sufficiently noticeable and is inviting scrutiny by media commentaries that question such muscle flexing.

For long-term observers of the RIC strategic triangle, though, these overheated political commentaries and hype only briefly obscure the larger tectonic shifts in world politics. Other than their alternative visions on political issues, the RIC Foreign Ministers' meet is gradually expanding cooperation between the three countries in several sectors, including disaster relief, agriculture and public health. There are regular exchanges amongst their academic, industrial and business communities. They have already set up subsidiaries like RIC Trilateral Experts Meeting on Disaster Management, Trilateral Business Forum, and Trilateral Academic Scholars Dialogue, and held other trilateral projects and conferences in these specialised fields. It is this expanding component of trilateral initiatives that remain the backbone of their growing mutual comfort and expanding weight relative to their global perspectives and aspirations.

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Peace on sale

JAWED NAQVI

I have searched the broad history of capitalism as best as I could, right up to the Occupy Wall Street Movement. I've looked up the evolution of global trade. Nowhere could I find a single clue to the mantra for peace between warring nations as flaunted by Messrs Asif Zardari and Manmohan Singh. Both want us to believe that their business elites are best equipped to normalise the dodgy relations between India and Pakistan.

If anything, officially sponsored trade as opposed to the days of the good old Kabuliwallah has been a source of conflict everywhere.

Look it in the eye. The worst-case scenario for a global conflict today exists between the world's two largest trading partners China and the United States. Pakistani businessmen pushing for increased business with India cite the growing Sino-India commerce as a model to replicate. In other words, we are being told to keep the powder dry, the Agnis and the Prithvis on the ready, while business goes on unperturbed. Can it happen, and to what avail?

History is replete with errors of judgment of the kind

But the nursery lyrics masked the trauma of entire civilisations across the oceans that were torn asunder by colonialism and its accompanying racist worldview. The East India Company was about trade, we know. Was it also about peace? Before Saudi Arabia prescribed the death penalty for carrying cannabis (which you can still smoke freely in Amsterdam), colonial Britain and its Indian compradors were pumping opium into China in the name of free trade. The Opium Wars, the Boston Tea Party in America were all aspects of trade for profit with official imprimatur. The people's resistance to thwart the nefarious business was fortunately just as robust.

I hear India, a net importer of oil, will sell petroleum products to Pakistan. The last time there was an oil shock India had to surrender a portion of its gold reserves to stave off defaulting on international loans. The move thrust Dr Manmohan Singh at the centre-stage of Indian politics and the IMF as the country's economic shepherd.

Any African leader who resisted the IMF was taken down. There is a long list of casualties Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast and Muammar Qadhafi of Libya. The history of the World Bank would be incomplete without reference to the central role in it of the retired warmongers who headed it.

Lahore and Karachi at present are not very different from New Delhi or Kolkata in electricity shortages. There was a time when Pakistan was offering to sell electricity to India. Now it's the other way round. Two energy-deficit countries trying to bail each other out makes for a welcome relief from their standard carping. But why should that hold up the withdrawal of troops from Kashmir and Siachen, and the easing of visas for the ordinary or underprivileged citizen in either country?

We are told that the climate of hate is abating between the two countries. This smacks of ridiculous pomposity. The only people I know that bad-mouth the other side are their sleuths, officials or diplomats and the occasional visiting journalist.

To say that hate is waning only goes to show it is something that can be managed and controlled with the throw of a switch. It also means that it can be unleashed at will. We have very plain TV outlets that can start or stop vicious campaigns, full of jingoism, projecting their countries as bigger in influence than the baby pool of the world actually assigned to them.

It is these journalists and assorted officials, more than anyone else, who are today assiduously promoting powerful business clubs usually known for their single-minded pursuit of private profit as beacons of hope for peace.

Two issues need to be resolved or at least understood in their context by the common people in India and Pakistan. The business community anywhere is not known for its sensitivity towards matters of peace. It can and often does make more profit out of war and prevailing tensions between states. I am not revealing a secret in asserting that businessmen by the very nature of their pursuit are prone to shore up right-wing politics.

Traders loyal to the revivalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami can, of course, forever go on kindling a fear psychosis about opening trade and investment across the borders. They are notorious for missing the point.

However, trade was one of the eight or nine issues between India and Pakistan in their composite dialogue. And it would be self-defeating to saddle it with the responsibility of heralding peace. That was never its strength, and it can't be today.

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Asif Ali Zardari and Manmohan Singh stood together in New Delhi adding weight to peace efforts with the first visit by a Pakistani head of state to India in 7 years.

Messrs Zardari and Singh seem susceptible to. Trade and commerce could be just about OK as a need to be addressed. But it can hardly be accepted as the only acceptable panacea for the politically fuelled woes that we confront. Ask the tormented people of Kashmir or the stranded soldier in Siachen what the priorities should be.

If somebody suggests that India-Pakistan trade, spurred by exclusively anointed business visits, will boost the possibilities of peace in the subcontinent, that is pure state-sponsored blackmail, not a considered choice on offer to the people. It's like the fable about catching a bird: light a candle and put it on the bird's head so that the melting wax blinds it. Then you can catch the bird.

How on earth are the various business federations or the chambers of commerce on either side going to pave the way for the armies to go back to their barracks? There never was any connection between low-trade volumes of any two countries and denial of visas to each other's citizens. And traders are about private profit and not public interest of the kind that people of the two countries should be looking at.

My favourite Anglo-Indian teacher at La Martiniere College in Lucknow taught innocuous sounding ditties in our geography class: 'In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. In fourteen hundred and ninety-eight, Da Gama knocked at India's gate.'

Salute to Jean Kay, the friend of the distressed

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR, BIR PROTIK

JEAN Kay was 28 years old in 1971. This Frenchman had fought in Biafra and Yemen. The horror of the war cut a deep impression in his mind. During his tenure of service he developed feeling and affection for the refugees and poor people. After returning from the war zone, he engaged himself in social work. He devoted himself to serve the poor. He became aware of the atrocities being committed by Pakistan army on the people of Bangladesh. He studied in depth the refugee problem and became aware of the lack of medicine and food supplies in the camps. He came to know through the newspapers about the large number of people, especially children dyeing in the camps. He decided to do something on his own for the helpless poor in the camps.

On December 3, 1971, Pakistan air force attacked the air fields of India adjacent to the border and subsequently Indian Government declared war on Pakistan. On that day Jean Kay, a French electronics technician prepared a meticulous plan and decided to execute it all by himself. He took a pistol and a small box containing wires and left for the Orly airport in Paris. He managed to board the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight 720B at Orly airport. Jean Kay selected the time and date of his operation because at that time the German Chancellor Willy Brandt was supposed to arrive at Orly airport for talks with French President Pompidou. He thought that security officials' attention would be diverted more towards the President and the Chancellor.

After the air craft left the boarding area, Jean Kay went into the cockpit with his pistol in his hand and ordered the pilots to cut the engine power. That was at 11:50 hours in the morning. He threatened the pilots with his pistol saying if they did not cooperate with him, they would be shot. He also threatened to destroy the air craft with a bomb which he said was inside the box being carried by him. Jean Kay got an interpreter among the passengers who could translate his French into English. The Pakistani passengers were terrified. However, he appeared to be courteous and did not harm anyone in the air craft. For six hours he kept the air craft under his control and kept on demanding his terms with the control tower. He demanded 20 tons of medical supplies and relief materials to be boarded on the air craft and flown to Bangladesh where refugees were sufferings. He also said that his terms are non-negotiable. Jean Kay threatened the people in the tower that any adventure made by law enforcing agencies would result in the destruction of the air craft and cause loss of human lives.

After long negotiation, the French authorities agreed to cooperate with Jean Kay. They informed him that the French Red Cross would arrange to deliver the medicine to the air craft and requested that no passengers were to be harmed. French Red Cross took the support of a charitable organization namely, Ordre de Malte. Immediately a truck with medicines and baby milk of French Red Cross along with personnel from Ordre de Malte approached the

air craft and conducted loading of one ton of medicine in the cargo hold of the air craft. A second truck full of medicine was approaching the air craft but the driver, warehouse men, mechanics and Red Cross workers were disguised policemen. They informed Jean Kay that they would deliver penicillin and other sensitive medicines into the cockpit as storing them in the cargo hold would damage them. The disguised policemen in the Red Cross attire were also requesting Jean Kay for permission for eight passengers and one child to leave the air craft. When the disguised policemen entered the air craft with penicillin boxes, Jean Kay did not suspect them and started receiving the boxes. Immediately after boarding the air craft, the policemen ceased Jean Kay. Four policemen were wearing Red Cross arm bands and two other dressed as mechanic. Some of them entered through the gate of the air craft and others through the trap doors. The four policemen pounced on Jean Kay who fired one round but no injury was caused. The box he showed to be containing explosives was found to be a harmless box filled with only electric wires.

Rest of the policemen quickly guided the passengers out of the air craft. After being fully overpowered and handcuffed, Jean Kay was taken out of the air craft, put into an ambulance with escort and driven to Orly Police Station. He was interrogated by the authorities in the police station where he clearly mentioned that he had undertaken the action to help the suffering humanity as there was no other way he could help them. He was put under arrest and the authorities prepared to prosecute him.

The passengers in the airport were questioned by the police on the episode. They told the police that Jean Kay never pointed the pistol to any of the passengers, did not maltreat anyone and told the passengers he was going it for sending the medicine for the refugees and poor people in Bangladesh. Soon after completion of checking of the air craft, the PIA flight with passengers left for Karachi.

Later that day, the French Red Cross and the Order of Knights Hospitaliers of Malta declared that 20 tons of medicines for which Jean Kay planned to hijack the air craft will be sent to the refugees of Bangladesh immediately and this promise was implemented. The hijacking had failed but aid was sent to the refugees.

During Liberation War of Bangladesh, many people supported the suffering humanity in different ways. Jean Kay was an adventurous young man who got much of his inspiration for serving humanity by reading books of Andre Malraux. After being taken into the police custody he was produced before the court and Andre Malraux, the Former Minister of France and human rights activist stood in the court as a friend of the accused. Andre Malraux, the great defender of Bangladesh cause testified in favor of Jean Kay. That could not help Jean Kay to remain out of jail. He was sentenced to five-year imprisonment. During the trial French lawyer Jean-Marc Varaut defended him. On release from prison he kept on his mission of serving suffering humanity across the globe in India, West Indies, Australia, etc.

The writer is a Freedom Fighter.