

India Should Rebalance Regional Focus

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December 2, 2013

Summary

In this third part of the Policy Paper series, P Stobdan argues that India should continue to remain engaged in Asia-Pacific for reasons not only confined to mercantile interest but also because it is an arena shaping the major powers behaviour. At the same, a regional rebalancing and attention to equally critical Central and West Asia will broaden India's prospects for shaping the global order.

While India's economic and security interests in Asia-Pacific region intensifies, a rebalancing is now required in its outreach in the nearby Eurasian continent. Historically, India had the deepest political, cultural and commercial contacts with the Eurasia and they were not without advantage to each other. India is already late in making a meaningful presence. Of course, lack of easy connectivity impeded India's efforts in the region. But, India's image and its political contacts with countries in Eurasia are still stand on sound footing.

Broadly, India's endeavour in Eurasia has been to prevent any hostile power from dominating the region. The "Connect Central Asia" launched in 2012 constitutes a few smart strategies designed to enhance India's visibility and to seek economic and energy interests with the view to allow the region to re-emerge itself as a commercial and cultural crossroads with greater links to India. The policy is a key component to Afghanistan's stability as well, as to India's own security. However, the entire region is now rapidly changing in the face of increased capital flows, expansion of regional trade and massive Chinese investments. For India, obviously, Russia's benign presence in the region would have been an ideal choice. But in the face of Russia's relatively low interest for holding on to the region and India's own limitation to reach out in Central Asia in a major way, the choice therefore was either let the extremists fill the vacuum or allow the Chinese to consolidate their control over Eurasia. Obviously, the choice for India is getting starker; China appears a lesser evil here. However, similar to the ASEAN states, the countries of Eurasia too view India as a future powerhouse of global growth and wish it play a balancer role vis-à-vis China. In the absence of it some of them would, if already not, meekly yield to China's rise.

Interestingly, like the Chinese businessmen, who had cast their gaze towards Eurasia a decade ago, the Indian entrepreneurs too are finding business opportunities they seek in looking towards the Caspian and Central Asia. Many young Indians engineers and technicians have found jobs, business and markets including in some of the high profile energy projects in Kazakhstan's oil fields. The energy management sector is likely to attract many more Indian professionals to the region. Some have already invested to get share of the natural resources in those regions. India particularly enjoys a niche market reputation, for example in IT industry, health and education sectors; even these remain unexplored. The problem so far has been that the government policy has not followed suit. And that needs to be changed in a major way.

West Asian Theatre

West Asia will continue to remain the main geopolitical lynchpin. Trend of China and India gradually stepping in to fulfil the vacuum in the region is glaringly visible. Here, economics or oil factor alone is not motivating their West Asia policy. Their common policy approach is guided more by the necessity to forestall seemingly a regional balkanization plan pursued by some powers to dissolve the existing major Arab states along warring ethnic, tribal, sectarian and other fault lines. The Muslim Brotherhood, supported by Saudi

Arabia and others, is forcefully trying to bring down the current regimes to be replaced by Caliphates which will centre on Riyadh.

Both China and India, despite being conscious about their energy dependency, are cognizant about preventing trend adversely affecting them. Both are aware of the Saudi-backed forces visualizing a similar scenario of promoting Wahhabi anarchy across Asia through violent jihadi means. As Prime Minister said, "the continuing turmoil in West Asia could not only imperil our energy security and the livelihood and safety of seven million Indians, but also become a crucible for radicalism, terrorism, arms proliferation and sectarian conflict that could touch our shores too."

To be clear, China's refusal to endorse regime change in Syria or even its Iran policy are more about leveraging against the US (strategic) and countering the Saudi Arabia (extremism). In a nutshell, both China and India are moving in the same direction; adopting policies that would limit outside forces stirring up insurgencies aimed at disrupting their investment efforts and growth process if not their territorial integrity. China has been relying so far on its policy of enticing potential Islamic states which could sponsor insurgencies. India's ability has been demonstrated by containing the menace through the democratic process that ensured minimum internal and external socio-political blowbacks.

Interestingly, despite all the initial euphoria about military intervention and regime change in Syria, the US is suddenly coming around the point of taking a cautious view about supporting the Syrian rebels perhaps at the dismay of its ally, Saudi Arabia. The change is seen in favour of engagement- a line pursued by Russia, China, India and Iran. Is this ambiguous stance a sign of US hedging in West Asia? Is this a new *quid pro quo* with Iran? Or has the US finally diagnosed that the Saudis have long manipulated the agenda and fuelled terrorism and used it as an instrument to retain supremacy in the Islamic world?

Finally, India should continue to remain engaged in Asia-Pacific for reasons not confined to mercantile interest but also because as Prime Minister suggested is an arena shaping the major powers behaviour. At the same, a regional rebalancing and attention to equally critical Central and West Asia will broaden India's prospects for shaping the global order. Here too, India and China should strengthen the case for cooperative security rather than competition.