

Russian, Chinese, Indian foreign ministers meet on US war threats against Iran

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The foreign ministers of Russia, China and India met in New Delhi last week for talks ostensibly focused on terrorism and Afghanistan.

While Iran was low on the official order of business, few commentators doubted that it was one of the most pressing matters addressed by the three countries. The Bush administration's military threats against Iran pose serious dangers for the three powers, all of which have close economic ties with the regime in Tehran.

Russia and China's differences with the US extend beyond Washington's drive to secure its hegemony over the Middle East. They view this as part of a broader political and military offensive that threatens their traditional spheres of influence in Central Asia.

For Russia, this centres on US designs on the strategic oil and gas resources of the Caspian Basin. But it is united with China, in particular, over the threat posed by America's Missile Defence Initiative (MDI) system. MDI involves long-range radar and interceptor missiles designed to detect and shoot down ballistic missiles, which aims to give the US a singular ability to successfully target nuclear warheads against its rivals.

India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and their Chinese counterpart Li Zhaoxing told a press conference that their consultations were aimed at promoting business, trade and energy security. The three ministers issued a joint statement which said, "...trilateral cooperation was not directed against the interests of any other country and was, on the contrary, intended to promote international harmony and understanding."

However, reflecting a more assertive posture directed against Washington, Lavrov read out the part of their communiqué that stated cooperation "rather than confrontation should govern approaches to regional and global affairs," with greater emphasis on "democratisation of international relations."

In a clear reference to Iran, an unnamed Indian official later told reporters, "The three ministers were in agreement that all such disputes should be resolved through dialogue and without the use of force."

Though regular trilateral talks were first proposed by Russia in 1996, the often-strained relations between the three powers have warmed significantly since the US invaded and occupied

Iraq in 2003. All three foreign ministers last met in Vladivostok, Russia, in 2005, the same year that Russia and China carried out their first joint military exercises.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao held their first trilateral summit meeting in St. Petersburg, Russia, in July 2006.

China and Russia, at loggerheads during most of the post-war era, have since developed close ties, with Russia supplying oil and gas to meet China's booming demand and Beijing buying increasingly sophisticated weapons systems from the Russian arms industry. Reflecting China's thirst for Russian hydrocarbons, Li Zhaoxing told the press conference, "We did talk about cooperation in the energy sector. All three economies are growing very fast and the potential for tripartite cooperation in trade and energy is vast."

New Delhi has loosened its ties to Moscow since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and India's subsequent integration within the global economy. Moscow is eager to revive the relationship with India, and there are moves for greater cooperation in the fields of energy and regional security. Putin made a state visit to New Delhi in January, accompanied by a huge entourage of businessmen and officials, during which the two countries agreed to energy and defence deals worth billions of dollars.

Following that visit, Manoj Joshi, an Indian strategic affairs analyst, commented, "A resurgent Russia has important implications for India's regional and global policy because it enhances the options available to New Delhi. Arguably, there is a closer identity of interests between the two on Central Asia, Iran and west Asia, than between New Delhi and Washington."

Russia is concerned with the growing closeness of New Delhi to Washington, which has sponsored India's nuclear weapons programme in order to secure the South Asian power as a regional ally. The Indian elite views Washington as a vital counterweight to its long-time rival China, and is also keen to diversify its supply of military technology, offsetting its reliance on Russian imports.

However, India remains cautious about throwing in its lot with Washington's war drive and to some extent continues to view Russia as its principal ally in Eurasia. It is also open to

attempts by China to improve relations between Beijing and New Delhi.

India, Pakistan and Iran have plans to develop a multibillion-dollar oil and gas pipeline that New Delhi regards as vital to meet its growing energy needs. While Washington has placed strong pressure on India to pull out of the deal, Putin has offered the services of Russia's state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom for the construction of the project.

US bellicosity is a major factor in driving forward improved relations between India and China, which have been steadily improving in recent years. Several high-profile meetings of officials from the two rival Asian powers have announced new targets for improving trade and cooperation on energy policy.

The Indian and Chinese foreign ministers met for separate talks on February 13 on strengthening regional cooperation, including improving transport links and easing visa restrictions. The ministers also discussed the border disputes between the two countries that led to military conflict in 1962.

Russia is playing the leading role in seeking to form a bloc against Washington.

In addition to the trilateral talks in New Delhi, Russia has responded to Washington's provocations against Iran with a major diplomatic offensive. Following his damning speech attacking US foreign policy at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 11, Putin flew straight to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries.

Russia and Saudi Arabia are the world's top oil exporters, and their talks were widely expected to primarily focus on oil prices, with Putin seeking to persuade the Saudi monarchy not to increase production, which the US desires as a means of moderating oil prices.

The US foreign policy website *Stratfor* commented that Putin's visit was driven by "strategic interests" as well as concerns about oil prices. It added that the Kremlin's hope to assert its power on the world stage "inevitably involves the Russians in the Middle East."

The meeting of the three foreign ministers followed on the heels of the agreement by the Czech Republic to host a radar station as part of the US MDI system, and the announcement by Poland that it was ready for America to use a military base on its territory to house a large silo capable of launching interceptor missiles.

Putin rejected US claims that the MDI system was designed to avert an attack by Iran or North Korea. General Yuri Baluyevsky, Russian chief of general staff, said, "Its interception range will cover a significant portion of the European part of Russia, and its integration with US information resources will further strengthen the anti-Russian potential of this facility.

"We would be forced to search for countermeasures which would be asymmetrical and clearly much cheaper," he warned.

Moscow has been quick to act upon this threat.

On February 7, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov

announced a 5-trillion-ruble rearmament programme, centred on replacing 45 percent of existing military hardware and upgrading missile systems in particular. Admiral Vladimir Masorin, the commander-in-chief of the navy, said that a priority "has been given to funding the sea-based strategic nuclear force."

Army chief of Staff Baluyevsky said on February 15 that Moscow might unilaterally withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which was signed by the US and the Soviet Union to ban ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges up to 5,500 kilometres. "It is possible for a party to abandon the treaty [unilaterally] if it provides convincing evidence that it is necessary to do so," said the general, "We have such evidence at present."

Baluyevsky said that the move was being considered because of US plans to expand its anti-missile shield into eastern Europe.

On February 19, an announcement at a meeting in Warsaw by the Polish and Czech prime ministers, Jaroslaw Kaczynski and Miroslav Topolaneck, that they intended to push ahead with plans to host the MDI system elicited a threat by Moscow to deploy medium-range ballistic missiles against the two states. "If the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic take such a step, the strategic missile forces will be capable of targeting these facilities," General Nikolai Solovtsov, Russia's strategic missiles commander, told a press conference.

For its part, Beijing in January responded to the US MDI plans by launching a missile to destroy one of its own satellites in order to demonstrate its ability to do the same to America's weapons guidance system.



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