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Overview

- Russia continued to dominate the political discourse in the first week of the Trump Presidency. Presidents Trump and Putin had a detailed telephonic conversation.
- The Russia-Turkey-Iran sponsored Syria talks in Astana made tentative progress towards sustaining the ceasefire.
- India-Russia economic cooperation highlighted in Vibrant Gujarat; political wrinkles sought to be ironed out.
- Russian Ambassador Kadakin passed away.

Russia in focus in US politics

The outgoing Obama Administration whipped up an anti-Russia fervour in USA by declaring new sanctions against Russia on December 30, 2016 and then ordering the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats from USA. This was a response to the alleged Russian interference in the US Presidential elections through hacking and other means. A Congressional hearing was hastily arranged, in which Administration officials claimed to have incontrovertible evidence of Russian culpability (and that of President Putin personally) in the hacking. The US Congress then heard that Russian news agencies – Sputnik and RT – were manipulating the opinions of the American public by their distorted news; there were calls for their banning. Then came the “leaks” that Russia had compiled damaging personal information to potentially blackmail Mr Trump. The CIA denied leaking them; the Russians said they suspected the British Mi6.

Russia declined to take counter-measures, with President Putin saying they would consider their response after the new US President assumes office. Meanwhile, the Trump transition team accused the Obama Administration of trying to restrict the new President’s room for manoeuvre vis a vis Russia.

The anti-Russian diatribe continued after the inauguration, but eventually, it appeared that Secretary of State nominee, Rex Tillerson, who had become the main target of anti-Russian hawks, would get confirmed by the Senate. President Trump has not receded from his position that the US needs to reset relations with Russia.

The Kremlin press note on the telephone conversation of Presidents Putin and Trump on January 28 indicated a substantive discussion, rather than a mere courtesy call. It was said that they agreed to jointly work to “stabilise and develop Russia-US cooperation on a constructive, equitable and mutually beneficial basis”. They reportedly had a detailed discussion on the fight against terrorism, the situation in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict, strategic stability, non-proliferation, the situation with Iran’s

nuclear programme, the Korean Peninsula issue and the Ukrainian crisis. They agreed that fighting international terrorism was the top priority and that the two countries could coordinate actions to defeat ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria. Finally, they are reported to have agreed to meet, though a date and venue were not specified.

It is not clear how fast President Trump will be allowed to move in these directions, given the continued opposition from virtually the entire defence and intelligence establishment.

Syrian talks in Astana

The Russia-Turkey-Iran initiative for talks in the Kazakh capital Astana between the various stakeholders in the Syrian crisis on January 23 and 24, 2017 ended with some agreement between the three sponsors to sustain the fragile ceasefire. Under the agreement, a trilateral monitoring group would be set up to enforce the ceasefire. Further details are yet to be worked out. The statement expressed the joint determination to fight the Islamic State, though Jabhat Fateh al-Sham was not named.

One of the main gains for Russia from these talks and the outcome is a clear acceptance by all parties involved of its pivotal role in the political process. The UN Special Envoy for Syria, de Mistura, attended the Astana talks and endorsed the tripartite agreement. The Russians, on their part, have declared that their efforts are meant to supplement, not replace, the UN's Geneva process. The US was virtually absent from the Astana talks, with its Ambassador to Kazakhstan being present only as an observer. Judging from the read-out of the Trump-Putin telephone conversation, there may be a more substantive US involvement when the Geneva process resumes – which, according to a statement from Russian FM Lavrov on January 27, may now be postponed from the earlier scheduled February 8 to the end of the month.

On a working visit to Moscow on January 25, 2017 King Abdullah of Jordan said his country “fully endorsed and supported the Astana process and very grateful for Russia's role”, adding, “without Russia, we will not be able to find solutions not only to the Syrian problem but also other regional problems in the Middle East”.

India-Russia Interactions

Russian Deputy PM Rogozin led a Russian delegation to the Vibrant Gujarat exposition (January 9-11), in which a number of large Russian companies and two Russian regions participated. Reports mentioned new areas of cooperation were discussed, like diamond-processing, dairy and smart cities.

The significant meeting, however, was that of DPM Rogozin with PM Modi (January 9), particularly in the backdrop of revelations about the Russian engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Russia-China-Pakistan meeting on Afghanistan in late December. It is highly likely that this issue was taken up in the meeting, though there was no public statement from either side on this. The Russians are aware of the Indian misgivings on their Taliban approaches. Their position is that it is motivated by their security concerns on the Afghanistan-Tajik border and that they will not prejudice India's interests. It is a dialogue that has necessarily to be carried out behind closed doors, and there are indications that it is happening. It may be noted that, in his Republic Day greetings to the Indian leadership, President Putin is quoted (by the Kremlin) as having said that “the privileged strategic partnership with India remains an unchanging foreign policy priority” for Russia (emphasis added). PM Modi, in his tour d'horizon of India's foreign policy at the Raisina dialogue (January 17) said, “President Putin and I have held long conversations on the challenges that confront the world today. Our trusted and strategic partnership has deepened”.

Russia has announced that Deputy PM Rogozin will visit Delhi in February to discuss defence cooperation. An official Russian announcement also said NSA Doval will visit Russia in end-January/early-February to discuss anti-terrorism cooperation with his counterpart in the Russian NSC. These are opportunities to achieve a mutual understanding of perspectives and concerns.

Ambassador Alexander Kadakin passed away

The passing away of Russian Ambassador to India, Alexander "Sasha" Kadakin, on January 26 2017, removed from the canvas of the India-Russia relationship a staunch friend of India and a strong votary of the strategic partnership. He held various diplomatic positions in the Russian Embassy in Delhi at various stages in the India-Russia relationship, clocking a total of about 20 years in India. He had therefore an acute understanding of India's political structures and bureaucratic procedures. As a fluent Hindi speaker, he developed a wide range of contacts in India. His was a warm-hearted and generous personality. He worked tirelessly to promote new partnership initiatives and to iron out wrinkles in the relationship on the Indian and Russian side. His would be very difficult shoes to fill in the Russian Embassy.

(The views expressed are personal)

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