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Overview

- President-elect Trump's remarks and senior appointment announcements indicate his continued commitment to "reset" relations with Russia; the Obama Administration continues to mobilise opinion to oppose it.
- After the fall of Aleppo to Syrian forces and the evacuation of "rebels" and dispossessed residents, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to cooperate to mediate a political settlement in Syria.
- The Russia-Japan reconciliation progressed significantly with the first visit of a Russian President to Japan in eight years.
- Russia reiterates its commitment to bilateral relations, but its initiatives on Afghanistan, with Pakistan and China, cause concern.

President-elect continues to signal a Russia "reset"

President-elect Trump refrained from reacting frontally to the unabated furore in US political and media circles about alleged Russian efforts to influence the course of the recent US Presidential elections. Rumours about appointment of ExxonMobil CEO Tillerson as Secretary of State generated indignant protests that he is "Putin's friend". Mr Trump went ahead and confirmed his choice.

A significant further hint about his perspectives was in a communication from the Trump transition team to the Pentagon (December 1) which listed out the top five defence priorities of the President-elect. Developing a strategy to defeat/destroy ISIS was first on the list. Russia, which is routinely described by every top defence official in the Obama Administration as an "existential" threat to USA, did not figure.

Meanwhile, the outgoing Administration – and personally President Obama – proceeded to stoke the controversy, making a number of statements about Russian involvement in the US elections, suggesting that President Putin may have personally authorized the hacking into the DNC mails and promising an investigation into it. He added in his farewell press conference that former President Reagan would be turning over in his grave since a recent poll had shown that over a third of Republicans support President Putin. Besides the questionable ethics of an outgoing President seeking to muddy the waters for a victorious Presidential candidate, such actions and remarks illustrate the depth of opposition that Mr Trump is likely to encounter to his stated Russia policy.

For his part, President Putin reiterated in a speech to the Russian Federal Assembly (December 1) that Russia can work with the US Administration "to put bilateral relations back on track....on an equal and mutually beneficial basis", adding that the two countries "have a shared responsibility to ensure international security and stability, to strengthen non-proliferation regimes".

Russia, Iran & Turkey agree to promote a political settlement in Syria

On December 13, Syrian armed forces, with Russian air support, finally recaptured the Syrian commercial city of Aleppo, after a struggle of about five years. On December 20, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey issued a "Moscow Declaration", agreeing to cooperate in seeking to achieve a country-wide ceasefire and to facilitate a political settlement in Syria, preserving its territorial integrity. It was agreed (at the suggestion of President Putin) that an effort would be made to bring together the Syrian government and opposition groups in Kazakhstan's capital Astana to hammer out a political settlement.

Notwithstanding this demonstration of unity, there remain differences of approach on the way forward. There are reports that the Syrian government is trying to engage some opposition groups for a wider ceasefire. Turkey is consulting with its favoured opposition groups. Other rebel factions (and their sponsors) are weighing available options. The Turkish Foreign Minister declared yet again that no political transition is possible with President Assad in position. Ultimately, any sustainable political settlement would necessarily have to also involve USA, UN and major Gulf countries. The stand taken by the incoming US Administration would be an important determinant of further developments.

Russia-Japan summit takes reconciliation forward

President Putin's visit to Japan on December 15-16 signalled the commitment of both countries to press ahead with a process of normalisation of bilateral relations, which Japanese PM Shinzo Abe has been striving for since his assumption of office in 2012 and which he resumed in real earnest with his "drop-in" visit to President Putin in Sochi in May 2016.

The "peace treaty", incorporating resolution of the Kurile Islands dispute was discussed, including in a one-to-one meeting between the two leaders. In recent months, both leaders have been signalling some flexibility in the approach to these negotiations, without diluting their territorial claims. President Putin has taken the line that if economic and other cooperation between the two countries can be expanded to mutual benefit, it would create the atmosphere of cordiality and mutual trust conducive to resolving the Kurile Islands issue to mutual satisfaction. PM Abe, while emphasizing the intensity of Japanese emotion on the dispute, has proposed Russia-Japan cooperation in 90 priority projects in eight identified areas.

The visit developed on this idea and added concrete strands of bilateral interaction. Over 50 new agreements and business contracts were concluded in the energy, automotive, chemical and various high-technology sectors. A Russian-Japanese investment fund was set, up with a capital of \$1 billion, to encourage participation in 13 priority development areas in the Russian Far East, including the free port of Vladivostok.

Of even greater significance was a renewal (after 2013) of a strategic issues dialogue between first deputy foreign ministers of the two countries and an agreement to revive other suspended bilateral dialogue mechanisms, including military contacts. The two National Security Councils have resumed dialogue and a resumption of the "2+2" dialogue of Foreign and Defence Ministers also appears to be on the cards.

It is remarkable that bilateral relations have progressed to this level, inspite of the continued Russia-West standoff and Japan's participation in the G7 sanctions against Russia. The China factor is the obvious motivation for the accelerated progress – more explicitly acknowledged on the Japanese side. This should not obscure the fact that serious impediments remain to resolution of the Kuriles dispute. US military posture in the Asia Pacific – and Japan's participation in it – is a major one. From a broader perspective, a Russian-Japan partnership which could act as counterweight to China in the Asia Pacific, is in the obvious strategic interest of USA, Japan and Russia, but would require sophisticated foreign policy manoeuvres by all three to materialize. The more emotive the Kurile Islands dispute is for Japan, the stronger is Russia's bargaining chip; and it is unlikely to make the compromise required for a final settlement without a satisfactory (for it) assurance that Japan will retain a strong stake in the partnership.

Russia reiterates India relations, but its Afghanistan policy causes concern

In his address to the Russian Federal Assembly on December 1 (the traditional Presidential “State of the Federation” Address), President Putin reiterated the importance of Russia-India relations: “Developing a special privileged strategic partnership with India is another major foreign policy priority for Russia. In October 2016, Goa hosted Russian-Indian top-level talks, confirming that our countries have great potential for strengthening cooperation in a number of areas.” Besides USA, China, India and (significantly) Japan were the only bilateral relations mentioned.

A similar commitment was expressed in Russia’s “Foreign Policy Concept”, approved by Presidential Executive Order of December 1, 2016: “Russia is committed to further strengthening its special privileged partnership with the Republic of India based on shared foreign policy priorities, historical friendship and deep mutual trust, as well as strengthening cooperation on urgent international issues and enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral ties in all areas, primarily in trade and economy, with a focus on implementing long-term cooperation programmes approved by the two countries.”

Even while there appears to be satisfactory progress on the range of bilateral initiatives discussed at the Goa Summit, Russia’s overtures to the Taliban in Afghanistan could create bilateral dissonance in an area of core importance to India. The recent Russia-China-Pakistan dialogue (Moscow, 27 December) on Afghanistan “expressed particular concern about the rising activity in the country of extremist groups including the Afghan branch of IS” and even more significantly, recommended a “flexible approach to remove certain figures from sanctions lists as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement.” In response to strong Afghan criticism at being left out of this dialogue, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman indicated that Afghanistan would be invited to the next meeting. Though Iran was also not at the Moscow meeting, it has expressed similar concern at the prospect of an IS build-up in Afghanistan. India has not commented officially as yet on the outcome of the Moscow meeting.

(The views expressed are personal)

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