



# Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

101/16

## RUSSIA-PAKISTAN 'FRIENDSHIP' JOINT MILITARY EXERCISE 2016: SHOULD INDIA BE CONCERNED?

**Chandra Rekha**  
*Associate Fellow, CAPS*

Russia and Pakistan are conducting its first ever joint military drills for counter terrorism and drug trafficking called 'Friendship 2016' from 24 September-07 October 2016 (as scheduled) despite the pressure of the political and security tensions in Indian sub-continent post Uri<sup>1</sup> attacks. The strengthening of ties between the two countries has caused anxiety to India and has undermined the confidence in its most reliable partner- Russia. In this scenario, the probable arguments that arise are: Are India's concerns justified with regard to Russia-Pakistan rapprochement? Will Pakistan gain 'equal' parlance with India in Moscow's foreign policy priorities? Has Russia calculated its 'risks' factors in strengthening relations with Pakistan? And Is Russia's detente with Pakistan a 'signal' or 'gamble' with its strategic partnership with India? Let us examine these arguments to understand the scope of the relations between

Russia and Pakistan and its implications on India-Russia relations.

During the Cold War period, Pakistan held strategic relevance and played a key role in promoting Western interests in Asian geopolitics and in curbing the advancement of Soviet Union especially post Afghanistan invasion. Simultaneously, Pakistan also fostered its own interests in gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan and also to make inroads into Central Asian geopolitics via Afghanistan. Post Soviet collapse, US emerged as the leader of the uni-polar world and its pre-eminence remained unchallenged for a long time. Many Asian countries including India began to tilt towards the US in post Cold War era. Hence, Pakistan partially lost its strategic relevance in Washington's foreign policy objectives. Pakistan's efforts to combat terrorism in its territory has also come under the US scanner post the killing of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin



Laden in Abbottabad and its failure to crack down on the Haqqani network.

The withdrawal of the US led international coalition combat forces from Afghanistan has once again elevated Pakistan's strategic relevance in many external actors' foreign policy interests including Russia. Russia's decision to collaborate with Pakistan is to bring stability in the Af-Pak region in order to preserve its interests in CAR. Moreover, due to its geographical proximity, the country is widely considered as a 'zipper' nation as it connects South Asia (through SAARC), China, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (EEU) including potential economic corridors (OBOR, CPEC) and energy supply routes.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the key interests of Russia developing bilateral ties with Pakistan are:

- a) Until the withdrawal of the US led combat forces from Afghanistan, the coalition forces provided a 'security blanket' for countries in and around Afghanistan including CAR from the rise and threat of Taliban and Islamist fundamentalism
- b) A security vacuum post US withdrawal from Afghanistan would most likely lead to the re-emergence of Taliban and religious fundamentalism that can spill over to Central Asia

c) Russia is collaborating with Islamabad to bring stability in the Af-Pak region, and protect its interests in Central Asia

d) The rapprochement is seen as an outcome of new synergies in India-US strategic partnership (defence cooperation, US support for NSG membership to India and the recent signing of LEMOA agreement) and also to strengthen Russia's 'pivot to Asia strategy'.

There is however suspicion and hostility in the relations that continues to exist since the Cold War period. Though the current developments between Moscow and of mutual benefits (only if Russia's expectations convert into payoffs), Moscow will still not displace Washington or even China as Pakistan's key partners. Pakistan's strategic interests have always continued to remain in conflict with Russian interests especially in Central Asia. Post 9/11 terrorist attacks and declaration on 'Global War on Terror' revived the strategic relevance of Pakistan in the US political elites circle. But the harbouring of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his killing in Abbotabad (Pakistan), led to Washington question Islamabad's role as a key player both in pursuing its interests in the regional geopolitics and also in combating terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism. Afghanistan is a known terrain for Russia but it relies on Pakistan's assistance to combat rise and penetration of terrorism and Islamist

fundamentalism. Nevertheless Pakistan's past record and reputation of promoting religious fundamentalism and terrorist organisations is a strategic gamble by Russia.

The growing ties between Pakistan and Russia irrespective of the hurdles that exist in the long term partnership between the two countries, the Indian strategic community is concerned about how or will this development change Russia's equation with India?

Soviet Union/Russia has always been vocal in condemning Pakistan's imprudent behaviour and its reputation of sponsoring terror outfits aimed at sabotaging India's national security at international platforms. As a sign of friendship and trust with India, Russia by de facto declined to sell defence equipment to Pakistan in the past but has now agreed to sell Mi35 attack helicopters and conduct joint military drills. The defence cooperation between Pakistan and Russia and the decision to go ahead with the joint military drill has left India in an intermediate state post Uri attacks. It is believed to have sent strong signalling to India that it may lose the 'special privilege' that it enjoyed in the partnership and foreign policy interests of the Kremlin. Hence, the question here is, should India be concerned?

Though Russia has gone ahead with the military drills with Pakistan, Russia's support for its traditional ally – India is evident from one of their recent statements issued post Uri attacks

which states *"We strongly condemn the terrorist attack against an army base in Jammu and Kashmir's Uri in the early hours of September 18, which killed 17 and injured 30 service personnel... We are also concerned about the fact that, according to New Delhi, the army base near Uri was attacked from Pakistani territory. We believe that this criminal act will be investigated properly, and that its organisers and perpetrators will be held accountable. We confirm our continued support for the Indian government's counterterrorism efforts"*.<sup>3</sup> Russia also shifted the venue of the exercise from Rattu area of Gilgit-Baltistan which falls in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) to Cherat.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside Russian and Pakistani troops conducting joint military drills, Russia is also conducting the INDRA 2016— the Russian-Indian counter-terrorist exercise in Vladivostok. In total, more than 500 servicemen of both sides, up to 50 pieces of armament and military hardware, including IFVs, APCs, T-72 tanks, Grad MLRS, cross-country automobiles, UAVs, attack and army aviation of the Eastern MD, are involved in the joint exercise.<sup>5</sup> The drills with India are at a much larger scale than with Pakistan. Additionally, Russia also conducted an eight day naval drill with China from 12-19 September 2016 in the South China Sea off the coast of China's Guangdong province. The Joint Sea-2016 exercises between the two countries involved surface ships, submarines, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and amphibious vehicles.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Russia has engaged three major Asian actors in joint military drills at individual level fairly around the same time period but the key deduction here is, it is carefully 'balancing' all three countries including accommodating their interests respectively. By bringing in Pakistan alongside India and China, Russia is set to vigorously engage in Asian geopolitics through its 'Pivot to Asia' strategy.

In the case of Pakistan, Russia's engagement including defence cooperation will stay limited so long as Islamabad is able to fulfil Moscow's interests and secure its key policy objectives. All in all, Russia's policy towards Pakistan is based on *"If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner"*. India will remain and hold more leverage in Russia's policy interests than Pakistan but same cannot be said in the case of China. Moreover, the real test for India-Russia relations would be the China-Pakistan 'all weather friendship' and not Russia-Pakistan as the former is aimed at threatening the national interests and security of India. Both India and Russia have emerged as influential global players and will require unconditional support from each other in achieving their respective policy objectives and goals. Thus, the need of the hour is that both India and Russia review their foreign policy interests towards each other to rekindle the bilateral relations similar to what existed during the Soviet era.

**(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])**

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On 18 September 2016, four terrorists suspected to be from the terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad carried an attack on the 12<sup>th</sup> brigade headquarters in Uri near Line of Control (LoC) that resulted in the killing of 17 Indian soldiers. This is second such incident to have taken place on Indian Territory this year after the Pathankot attacks. Though all the terrorists were killed on both occasions, the security breach and the killing of defence personnel have raised India's security concerns that are mainly emanating from the territory of Pakistan and its terror outfits.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Korybko, "Pakistan Is The "Zipper" Of Pan-Eurasian Integration", *Russian Institute of Strategic Studies*, September 09, 2015. <http://en.riss.ru/analysis/18882/>

<sup>3</sup> "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the terrorist attack in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation*, 19 September 2016 [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2449485?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJE02Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2449485?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB)

<sup>4</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russia cancels joint military drill with Pakistan in PoK post Uri attack; to conduct drill only at Cherat near Peshawar", *The Economic Times*, 23 September 2016. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/russia-cancels-joint-military-drill-will-pakistan-in-pok-post-uri-to-conduct-drill-only-at-cherat-near-peshawar/articleshow/54485444.cms>

<sup>5</sup> Indra-2016, Russian-Indian counter-terrorist exercise, started in Primorsky Krai, *Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation*, 23 September 2016. [http://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12096915%40egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096915%40egNews)

<sup>6</sup> Ankit Panda, "Chinese, Russian Navies to Hold 8 Days of Naval Exercises in the South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinese-russian-navies-to-hold-8-days-of-naval-exercises-in-the-south-china-sea/>

