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WHY IS RUSSIA APATHETIC TOWARDS CPEC?

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Russia today is a resurging global actor with a seemingly successful campaign in Ukraine (2014) and Syria. These events have uplifted its confidence and approach in dealing with the current developments in world affairs. While it is widely argued that Russia is 'punching above its weight' given its fragile domestic conditions, at the foreign policy level it has presumably struck the right cord. In its quest to 'once again' emerge as a key global player; Moscow has widened its scope by developing ties with various countries including Pakistan.

The paradigm shift in Moscow's 'attitude' towards Islamabad has often been justified as a result of a) Russia's growing security concerns in Central Asian region post US drawdown from Afghanistan, b) geographical diversification of its defence and energy markets and more importantly c) India's multifarious foreign policy pursuit especially with the Washington administration alongside its strategic partnership with Russia losing intensity.

The sale of Mi35 helicopters, the first joint military drills called 'Friendship 2016' and the trilateral meeting between Russia-Pakistan-China on December 27, 2016 in Moscow to review Afghanistan's security have signalled a steady and strong partnership between Russia and Pakistan. At present, on the economic front, Russia and Pakistan are exploring prospective areas for economic ties at the bilateral level especially in textiles, oil and gas sector exploration and pipelines. The two countries also signed in October 2015 an inter-governmental agreement for the construction of gas pipeline from Lahore to Karachi. Russia has agreed to invest \$2 billion in the project, the first phase of which is expected to conclude by December 2017.¹ Although there is a possible detente between Russia and Pakistan, Moscow is aware that the size of cooperation between Russia and India can't be compared with the cooperation with Pakistan especially in the field of defence and energy.

The growing partnership between Russia and Pakistan has caused anxiety for India and uncertainty in the overall strategic partnership with its traditional ally- Russia. But is it right to say that the current partnership between Moscow and Islamabad is 'foolproof' and that India could be displaced by Pakistan in Russia's foreign policy interests?

In order to get a better understanding on the future prospects of Russia-Pakistan bilateral relations, let us take the relevance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for Russia as a case study. In December 2016, an official statement was issued by the Russian Embassy in Islamabad refuting Russia's plan to merge the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with CPEC. Russian Ambassador to Pakistan Alexey Dedov stated that *"...Moscow is not discussing the possibility of joining this project with Islamabad. Russia-Pakistan trade and economic cooperation has its own inherent value and we intend to strengthen it."*²

The above statement by the Ambassador indicates that Russia does not consider the CPEC as being of much benefit to Russia yet. The following reasons will assist in understanding Russia's hesitation to become part of the CPEC project.

One needs to bear in mind that One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative or Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are all set to maximise China and Russia's trade and connectivity to

European and Eurasian markets at large. In this regard, geographical location for Russia has never been a constraint given its direct access to these potential markets. Moscow in any case is in an advantageous position in these regions as it continues to have good political and diplomatic leverage in (CAR) and economic and energy interdependence (European countries) including its current relations with China which is at a historical apex.

Given the volatile nature of the route of CPEC passing through Pakistan and Xingjian region, Russia would any day prefer to circumvent Pakistan's economic corridor. CPEC is an initiative completely funded by China with Pakistan's strategic location providing its geographical and logistical support to its 'all weather partnership'. If Russia is to join CPEC, it would have less leverage in this initiative as there is no financial/logistical contribution in this project. However, Russia's has acceded to merge EEU with China's ambitious project - OBOR.³

Russia has only assented to merge the OBOR project with EEU and not CPEC. CPEC is one of the six economic corridors of the larger OBOR project namely:

- New Eurasia Land Bridge
- China-Mongolia-Russia
- China-Central Asia-West Asia

- China-Indochina Peninsula
- China-Pakistan, and
- Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar

If Russia is to circumvent the contested route of overall CPEC project, it would still have the New Eurasia Land Bridge, China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia to benefit from China's ambitious OBOR project. For instance, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor is linked by land for trade and cross-border co-operation. The three countries have agreed to renovate Russia's Eurasia Land Bridge and the proposed development of Mongolia's Steppe Road. This commitment will strengthen rail and highway connectivity and construction, advance customs clearance and transport facilitation, promote cross-national co-operation in transportation, and help establish the China-Russia-Mongolia Economic Corridor. In July 2015, the second summit saw the official adoption of the *Mid-term Roadmap for Development of Trilateral Co-operation between China, Russia and Mongolia*.⁴

Another key factor for Russia's turndown to join CPEC is because the corridor crosses through Xinjiang, Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan. Given the traditional and reliable partnership with India, Russia would be cautious not to antagonise its 'special' partner- India which has voiced its reservation in this project. Russian consideration for Indian sensitivities

was evident when it shifted the venue of the military exercise with Pakistan from Rattu area of Gilgit-Baltistan which falls in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) to Cherat. Russia has been vocal in condemning Pakistan's strategy of sponsoring terror outfits against India. Moscow has repeatedly backed India's position on Kashmir and had vetoed the United Nation Security Council resolution in 1962 on Kashmir issue.

Beijing has initiated the CPEC without India's consent but rather has overlooked India's concerns and sovereignty. By refusing to join CPEC project, Russia has reinforced the fact that India always held and will continue to hold more leverage than Pakistan in its foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, New Delhi should persist in communicating its security concerns emanating from Pakistan to Russia and to assure Moscow of the special ties it shares with it.

(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

¹"Pakistan, Russia sign agreement for construction of North-South gas pipeline", *The Dawn*, 16 October 2015.<http://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>, accessed on January 31, 2017.

²Embassy of Russia in Pakistan, 19 December 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/russianembassypakistan/post/s/1991212957772317>, accessed on January 31, 2017.

³"Russia, China agree to integrate Eurasian Union, Silk Road, sign deals", *Russia Today*, 8 May 2015. <https://www.rt.com/business/256877-russia-china-deals-cooperation/>, accessed on January 31, 2017.

⁴"What is Belt and Road Initiative", HKTDC Research, <http://beltandroad.hktdc.com/en/about-the-belt-and-road-initiative/about-the-belt-and-road-initiative.aspx>, accessed on January 31, 2017.