



RUSSIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS: IS THERE A FUTURE?



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For decades, Russia's grand strategy in Asia has mainly revolved around two Asian giants— India and China. Since the announcement of the 'pivot to Asia' strategy in 2014, Russia aims to widen the scope of its Asian grand strategy that includes countries such as Pakistan. Interestingly, the recent thaw in Russia-Pakistan relations has caused anxiety among Indian political elites and academic community. India's concerns are well-founded as its time tested partner- Russia has channelled its focus towards Pakistan- its once Cold War rival and an adversary of India. Moreover, a trilateral arrangement is taking shape between Russia, Pakistan and China, further intensifying India's apprehensions.

Given the current developments in Russia-Pakistan relations, it is of time-sensitive necessity to understand whether Pakistan is indeed capable or rather willing to deliver the expected outcome for Russia? Is Russia right in focusing on Pakistan to strengthen its pivot to Asia strategy at the cost of India? In other words, is there really a future for Russia-Pakistan relations in coming years?

Russia's engagement with Pakistan is the outcome of the new synergies in the face of India's shift towards the United States especially in defence sphere. By mending ties with Pakistan, Russia has tacitly signalled its displeasure to India of a growing strategic partnership with the US. Another factor for this development is Russia's re-focus on using military diplomacy. In June 2014, Russia agreed to sell five Mi 35 attack helicopters to Pakistan for counter terrorism. Russia's military diplomacy has attracted some of the key non-NATO allies of the US such as Pakistan and Bahrain to buy Russian weapons. Russia has also conducted joint military exercises with Pakistan despite India voicing its concerns.

Another aspect to the growing proximity between Russia and Pakistan is that the US seems to distance itself from its most important non-NATO ally— Pakistan in recent times. Pakistan's failure to

combat terrorism in its territory and the killing of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad and its failure (rather unwillingness!) to crack down on the Haqqani network has come as a major blow to Pakistan-US relations.

Interestingly, a correlation can also be drawn to the prediction by the strategic community on the emergence of a 'new Cold War' given the hostilities between Russia and the United States post Ukraine crisis and Crimea referendum. The pattern is interesting as the new Cold War wave saw both Russia and the US instantaneously extending a friendly hand to the two most crucial Cold War allies of the either side, i.e, Pakistan (an ally of the US) and Cuba (an ally of the Soviet Union). Restricting our analyses to the relevance of Pakistan for Russia; Russia is well aware of the role of Pakistan in promoting US interests during Soviet Union invasion in Afghanistan. In the current context, one of the key interests of Russia in Asia is Afghanistan security. The reduction of US presence and its role in Afghanistan since 2014 has minimised the security umbrella that it provided since 2000. Knowing the importance of Central Asian region, Russia's biggest fear is the domino effect of an unstable Afghanistan. While Russia has taken Taliban into confidence to ward off threats emanating from Islamic State in Afghanistan, Pakistan is expected to play a key role to yield the expected strategic pay offs for Russia. More importantly, to strengthen Russia's 'pivot to Asia strategy', a less hostile Pakistan will be the key and that can only be possible by keeping Pakistan away from the US policy interests.

Russia-Pakistan relations may have improved since 2014; however, the pace of strengthening is rather unhurried and limited in scope. The main factor behind the reluctance in strengthening of ties between the two countries is the historical baggage of suspicion and hostility. Russia's interests do not align with Pakistan's own national interests. Pakistan wants to play an influential role in the regional geopolitics of CAR but Russia has so far managed to insulate the region from Pakistan's reach. Russia has been vocal in criticising Pakistan's anti-India sentiments and sponsoring terrorist activities that has threatened India's national security. Citing few more examples of Russia favouring India's interests and concerns over Pakistan was seen in the case of the CPEC project and the 9th BRICS summit held in Xiamen China 2017.

Elaborating further on this aspect, Russia is clear of staying away from the CPEC initiative which is part of the OBOR project for which it has shown consent. This is mainly a conscious effort not to antagonise its most reliable and trusted partner- India, as the trade route of CPEC traverses through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. During the 8th BRICS summit held in Goa, India was highly disappointed when Russia preferred to stay mute over its grievance of Pakistan sponsored terrorists activities. However, during the 9th BRICS summit, the key take away was the inclusion of Pakistan-based terror

outfits namely the Haqqani network, Laskar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, Hizb-e-Mohammed in the BRICS Joint Declaration. In fact, it is argued that Russian persuasion of China not to shield its all weather friend- Pakistan especially in the fight against terrorism apparently played the most decisive role in including these Pakistan terror outfits in the Joint Declaration. This development has also asserted India's faith that BRICS cannot be used as a forum by China to act against Indian interests.¹

As for defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, it is limited in scope and will remain so in coming years. As mentioned earlier, Russia is refocusing on military diplomacy which has emerged as a key factor in revamping its global status. In this direction, India is a bigger commercial defence market compared to Pakistan which Russia would never want to overlook. Moreover, China will continue to remain as Pakistan's key defence supplier nation.

While Russia is keen to use Pakistan as leverage to carry forward its interests, Pakistan will be a liability more than leverage as a result of its external and internal politics and crisis. Given Pakistan's reputation as a terrorist harbouring nation and as an agent of Chinese interests, Russia will be cautious in furthering its ties and balancing this uneven ratio. Additionally, despite the US giving military and economic aid in delivering its interests, Pakistan has failed to comply with US interests on several occasions including its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, and combating terrorist activities. In the same breath, it would be interesting to see if Pakistan is willing to execute Russian interests or its own national interests. Compared to India, there is absence of mutual interests, understanding and trust between Russia and Pakistan. More importantly, Russia in its quest to achieve short term goals through its partnership with Pakistan cannot overlook its special and privileged partnership with India. Hence, taking all these arguments into consideration, Russia cannot gamble with its long term national interests. It will thus have to deconstruct its policy towards its new found partner- Pakistan if the partnership is to see the light of day in coming years.

(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])

Keywords: Russia's Pivot to Asia, Defence cooperation, Afghanistan, BRICS joint declaration, Russia-India Strategic partnership, Russia-Pakistan relations

Notes

¹ Arun Mohanty, "India's take away from ninth BRICS summit", *The Week*, 19 September 2017. <http://www.theweek.in/content/archival/news/india/india-take-away-from-ninth-brics-summit.html> accessed on 23 September 2017.