

RUSSIA-CHINA-PAKISTAN: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

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INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics brings unexpected bedfellows together in the current strategic climate, as post-Cold-War dynamics stands largely altered with worsening quarrels over maritime jurisdiction. Countries that were ideologically and strategically sworn enemies are forming new alliances reinforcing the fact that there are no permanent friends or enemies in international politics. It is merely interests that matter. How would one explain the bonhomie that Russia seems to have developed with Pakistan, a country which in cahoots with the US was responsible for humiliating the erstwhile USSR and ousting them from Afghanistan? On similar lines Pakistan and China were ideologically opposed to each other with the former being in the anti-communist camp headed by the US. China and Russia, though both communist countries, shared a frosty relationship for decades and have now warmed up to each other. The coming together of Pakistan, Russia and China is bound to have long term strategic implications for India.

The 1979-1989 Afghan imbroglio, which aimed to prop up a Communist government in Afghanistan sponsored by the Soviets, tore Afghanistan apart,

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Pakistan willingly accepted the role offered by the US to avenge the Soviet Union as it was bracing under the loss of its eastern territory to India in a battle in which Pakistan strongly felt that the Soviets unjustly supported India.

and also took a toll on the Soviets, draining Moscow economically and leaving at least 15,000 Soviet soldiers dead, all killed by the *Mujahedeen* who were armed overtly and trained by the Pakistan ISI. It is believable that the American intervention in Afghanistan, which used Pakistan as a conduit, was America's way of paying the Soviet Union for humiliating America at the hands of the Vietnamese, who were aided and abetted by the Soviet Union. Pakistan willingly accepted

the role offered by the US to avenge the Soviet Union as it was bracing under the loss of its eastern territory to India in a battle in which Pakistan strongly felt that the Soviets unjustly supported India.

The Soviet's military involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the fierce resistance encountered largely contributed to Soviet Union's strategic overextension and subsequent break-up. As a matter of sheer historical coincidence, the Cold War saw the dismemberment of Pakistan and breakup of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, both played a part in dismembering each other. This piece of history will certainly linger in the minds of both the countries as Russia and Pakistan are attempting to forge a new strategic relationship. It is therefore surprising that Russia decided to engage diplomatically with the same country that was its long-time foe. The move towards friendship will present difficulties but for now the changing geostrategic scenario in Afghanistan has become a primary factor for both to warm up to each other, as both have vested interests in Afghanistan.¹

Meanwhile, on Russia and China, the recent Pentagon white paper has propounded a sinister theory. The paper opines that if Putin plays his cards shrewdly, he can pit the Chinese against the Americans. It would be poetic justice for the Russians as Richard Nixon, the US President in the 1970s, used

1. Bailey, S. M. G., Allison. (n.d.), "This Time, Russia is in Afghanistan to Win", *Foreign Policy* at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/russia-afghansitan-united-states-bountygate>. Accessed on May 8, 2021.

the Chinese against the erstwhile USSR to pit one communist nation against the other.² The Russians have effectively used this card and have ensured a wedge between the Chinese and the Americans, while also bringing the Russians closer to the Chinese in a deft stroke of strategic diplomacy.

Over the past seven decades, China and Russia's strategic relations have witnessed many ups and downs. It started in the 1950s with a sense of comradeship as both were avowed communist nations and the initial bonding was strong with a robust economic and political relationship. The joy was short-lived as both the communist countries drifted apart with bitter feelings towards each other. The existence of a persistent mutual hostility and territorial disputes culminated in an open border war in March 1969, termed as the Ussuri crisis at the Damansky/Zhenbao islands, which threatened the use of nuclear weapons on the other. Before the disintegration of USSR in December 1991 both countries experienced bitter phases of diplomatic endeavours. The problems on the eastern border that precipitated the Russo-Chinese conflict, were resolved in the 1991 territorial agreement during Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow.³ The nail in the coffin was the Chinese betting on the Communist conservatives in August 1991 who attempted the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. The coup failed and it deepened the wedge between both the countries. It is another story that the Chinese were anxious about the survival of the socialists.⁴

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2. T. E. Board, "Opinion | What's America's Winning Hand if Russia Plays the China Card?", *The New York Times*, July 21, 2019 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/21/opinion/russia-china-trump.html>. Accessed on August 1, 2021.
 3. Jyotsna Bakshi, "Russia-China Boundary Agreement: Relevance for India", *Strategic Analysis*, at <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jan-4-01html.html>. Accessed on May 21, 2021.
 4. Akhihiro Iwashita, "Russo-Chinese Relations in the post-Cold War period(1)", (n.d.), at <https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/sympo/Proceed97/Iwashita.html>. Accessed May 20, 2021.

The current bilateral relationship between Russia and China is based on their own strategic necessities. The annexation of Crimea by Russia saw it falling out of favour with the Europeans and it paid dearly as severe economic sanctions were imposed following its ouster from the G8 group of nations. These actions by the western nations has not mellowed the Russians, who have remained assertive to date. Russia's drift towards China therefore was necessitated by the various sanctions imposed by the US and European Union on the finances, energy and defence sectors over Russia's invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea.⁵

When the Pakistanis realised that the Americans may not back them in their misadventures towards India during the 1965 war, they slowly starting drifting towards China as both the countries had a common enemy in India. What started as a frosty relationship, as both the countries do not share the same ideology till date, has nurtured into a strong partnership only to counter India which can be termed as an alliance of convenience. An alliance of convenience in simple terms may be referred to as a collusion between countries who are ideologically opposed to each other but have a common enemy to counter. It is clear in this case that the Chinese and Pakistani collusion is merely to counter India. Strange bedfellows emerge when political actors with very different values and ideologies, become temporary tactical allies opportunistically but not happily. It is blindingly obvious that politics has brought together three countries who were once ideologically opposed to each other reinforcing the fact that alliances are by convenience and not by conviction.

AXIS OF CONVENIENCE: CHINA-RUSSIA

Both Russia and China visualise their glorious pasts and currently seek legitimate recognition over their contribution to the growth of the civilisation. Despite all the bonhomie, the Russians regard China as a worrisome neighbour whose economic clout and political ascendancy

5. Susan Heavey, "U.S., EU, Canada Impose Sanctions on Russians over Ukraine", Reuters, March 15, 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-ukraine-idUSKCN1QW26J>. Accessed on May 2, 2021.

is seriously threatening Russia's status as a superpower. The erstwhile USSR had always regarded China as a potential threat for decades, ever since communist neighbours drifted apart in the 1960s. Ironically, China was most hostile towards Russia when it was by far the weaker party in the 1950s and 1960s. Even in the early 1980s, China was striking back at the Soviet Union, by hosting the joint US-China intelligence listening posts in Manchuria to monitor the Soviet Union and two other such joint intelligence posts in Xinjiang to track Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Additionally, it maintained training camps in Kashgar and Khotan for the Afghan *Mujahideen* who were fighting the Soviets then, offered weaponry and financial support to the *Mujahideen* resistance, including military advisers, in collaboration with the CIA and the ISI to bleed the Red Army.⁶

The collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union, the most powerful Socialist state in the world, shocked the Chinese Communists who were gripped by fear over their own socialist future. The Chinese were not only worried about their own communist state but were apprehensive that they may be in the crosshairs of the Americans. The disintegration of the Soviet Union did not minimise the mistrust and the hatred nursed by the Russian elite towards the Chinese. The Russian elite viewed China with contempt as an underdeveloped vassal state. The post-1991 years witnessed Russia's unabashed obsession to forge a strategic partnership with the West and no importance was accorded to China. At the same time, many policymakers in Beijing have regarded Russia as an erratic and unpredictable international actor.

Following the invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, the western nations imposed sanctions on Russia. This drew the Russians closer to China, since the Chinese were willing to bail out Russia economically, and thus both the countries started bonding against a common adversary. Russia and China were unforgiving in their remarks over the hypocrisy of the Western-style democracy and America's imperialistic moves. To date Russia's best friends are unmistakably the Chinese. This is unsurprising,

6. M. K. Bhadrakumar, "India has Lessons from Sino-Russian Normalisation", Indian Punchline, February 23, 2021 at <https://www.indianpunchline.com/india-has-lessons-from-sino-russian-normalisation>. Accessed on May 2, 2021.

given Russia's desperate need for money and China's severe need for oil, and both the countries can effectively leverage each other's resources to assure that their populace's growing needs are effectively met.

Going back to the 1990s, Russia had been unhappy for being singled out by specific nations and the scathing criticism that followed over the nature in which it conducted its operations in Chechnya. Further, Russia was very vocal over the US air strikes on Serbia terming it as an act of individual aggression, as Serbia happened to be a steadfast Russian ally. Additionally, the burgeoning strategic partnership between the USA and Japan concerned the Russians, as both Japan and Russia were yet to settle the disputes over Kuril Islands to which both the countries lay ownership claims. Notwithstanding the frosty relationship Russia shared with the Western nations throughout the later part of the 20th century, there were sincere efforts by the Russian President Vladimir Putin to improve and take the relations to the next level. Indeed, during his initial presidential term, President Putin proposed that Russia join the NATO in 2000. This is despite the fact that NATO stood as a military alliance to counter the Soviets and then Russia to prevent any acts of expansionism against its allies. The Russian foreign ministry sent letters to US, the UK and France expressing its desire to join the NATO and to their utter shock were told that the alliance rejected Russia's application for membership.⁷ To add fuel to the fire, the opening of membership to central European nations who were erstwhile partners in the Warsaw Pact of countries, the United States sponsored unjust war on Iraq, and the support coated with sympathy accorded to the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine left Russia utterly disenchanted and fuelled its fury against the west.⁸

The alliance that exists between Russia and China follows an agreement signed in 1996 that emphasises mutual strategic interests and partnership. Three years later, in October 1999, both the navies conducted a joint naval exercise with the participation of warships from the Pacific fleet of Russia

7. Blake Stilwell, "That time Russia tried to join NATO", at <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/russia-tried-to-join-nato>. Accessed on April 9, 2021.

8. D. Lane, " 'Coloured Revolution' as a Political Phenomenon", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 25(2-3), 2009, pp. 113-35, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270902860295>. Accessed on May 3, 2020.

and the Eastern Fleet of China participating. The Russian annexation of Crimea through military means in 2014, fuelled by civil unrest in Ukraine, deteriorated relations between Western nations and Russia to their lowest point since 1993, when the Soviet Union had disintegrated into many breakaway republics. The initial salvo of the Western economic sanctions imposed in 2014, had a severe effect on the Russians and it dawned that its dependence on the west for its sale of hydrocarbons, as well as the curbs to access various cutting-edge technologies and denial of low interest loans was likely to devastate its struggling economy. Every action has its consequences and the economic sanctions imposed forced Russia to seek a strong partner in order to survive this confrontation with the West. China, which was emerging as a major power both economically and militarily, appeared to be a natural ally to the Russians as it did not share the Western sentiments on human rights. China seemed fortuitous and a fine alternate partner. The declining oil prices drastically affected the Russian economy resulting in a financial crisis. Subsequently, the Chinese help by way of finances, imports of various items, proved to be a major stabilizing agent for the Russian economy. To forge stronger ties in a multilateral format between Russia and China were officialised by the creation of the Shanghai Five grouping subsequently known as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). There has been no looking back for both the countries. China was extremely keen on the state-of-the-art Russian weaponry, and soon China overtook India as largest importer of Russian military hardware.

China had for years experienced its own tensions with the West especially over its gross violation of human rights in the Uighur and Tibet Autonomous Region, belligerence against Taiwan and its scant disregard for international laws. China's foreign affairs officials adopted a restrained approach in the 1980s, as the country was concentrating on its economic build-up. China's foreign policy was being shaped by an urgent need for Western investments and expertise, along with an eagerness to be a part of the WTO bandwagon, and hence undoubtedly, Beijing was eager to maintain friendly relations with the West. The Chinese in the last decade of the 20th century were desperate to

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bridge the gap with the Western nations after it came under severe criticism and condemnation over the way it handled a student protest in the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The protest was peaceful with a vocal call for democratic rights but it was crushed ruthlessly by the People's Liberation Army. Despite desperate Chinese attempts to placate the West, the sale of arms was curtailed and sanctions were neither eased nor lifted. To further fuel the Chinese anger, there was an increased supply of weaponry to Taiwan by the Americans. To add to China's discomfort, the Western leaders repeatedly met the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetans, and perpetually challenged

China on human rights issues. Thus, China was also on the lookout for a partner that was militarily strong and had scant regard for human rights. Russia perfectly fitted the bill, and thus the axis of convenience was born.

RUSSIA-PAKISTAN—CLASH OF THE CULTURES

In the late 1940s, the newly founded Pakistan's Islamic movement contained much rhetoric hovering around the Islamic ideology. It was not surprising that many Pakistani Islamic scholars regarded the Marxist-Leninist ideology propagated by the erstwhile USSR as antithetical to their own. On their part, the Soviets had scant regard for Pakistan's rant and mocked the "Islamic Ideology", the notion of an "Islamic State", and its clarion call to create an "Islamic Bloc" encompassing all the Muslim states of the Middle East and warned of an impending political and religious violence.⁹ When Pakistan's ill-timed war waged against the Indian state to occupy Kashmir in 1948 was

9. Sardar Riffat, "Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and its Implications for Pakistan", *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 19(3-4), 1986, p. 316, at [https://doi.org/10.1016/0039-3592\(86\)90051-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0039-3592(86)90051-7).

brought before the UN Security Council the Soviets preferred to remain neutral. This act of the Soviets choosing to remain neutral fuelled Pakistan's hatred towards the Soviet Union as it was obvious that the Soviets wanted a *status quo* on the Kashmir issue. To express their annoyance, then Pakistani Prime Minister Mr Liaquat Ali Khan turned down the Soviet request for a state visit and accepted Washington's request in 1949.

Through the course of time, the Soviet Union adopted a policy of coercion and antagonistic attitude towards Pakistan, as Pakistan became an ally of the West, headed by the US, and opted to sign the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with the United States in May 1954. During the latter part of 1954 it became a member of SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization), along with the United States, Britain, France, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. In 1955, CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) or the Baghdad Pact was spearheaded by a host of Islamic countries comprising Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and also included the United Kingdom to primarily ensure the security of the Asian nations from the looming threat of communist expansion. Frustrated by the Soviet policies, Pakistan smartly chose to align itself with the US and was in favour of their policies to thwart the designs of the Soviet Union and China. Pakistan for all its association with the United States policies was rightly denoted as "America's most allied ally in Asia." Pakistan also happened to be the sole Asian country with a membership in both SEATO and CENTO. It had openly sided with the west to counter the growth of communism by the erstwhile USSR and China.

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US President Richard Nixon used his good rapport with President Yahya Khan of Pakistan to approach PRC leadership covertly through an effective intermediary. Henry Kissinger, the trusted advisor and aide to Richard Nixon on National Security Affairs, travelled to China in July 1971

in a Pakistan International Airlines aircraft, a visit which was shrouded in secrecy, to discuss the conditions under which US and China would consider normalising relations. The Soviets retaliated by signing the India-Soviet Mutual Friendship treaty in August 1971, which provided India with political and calculated support during the India-Pakistan War of 1971. Pakistan suffered the ignominy of an infamous surrender in its eastern front paving the way for the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh. The Pakistani masses, including its military, consider the disunion of Pakistan as the price it had to pay for ensuring rapprochement between the US and China. Pakistan extracted its revenge when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Historically, Pakistan and the former USSR shared less than lukewarm defence ties except for a brief period between 1965 and 1971, when following sanctions by the US, Pakistan turned to USSR, who supplied military equipment worth US\$ 310 million. This fledgling relationship was cut short by Soviet support to India in the 1971 Indo-Pak War and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979).

In the aftermath of the twin towers blast, the Russians were highly critical of Pakistan sponsoring terror not only in Jammu and Kashmir but also in Chechnya and Tajikistan. The raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011 was a huge blow to the Pakistani prestige as the Americans had brought to the fore Pakistani duplicity in aiding and abetting terrorists. Further, US' favourable tilt towards India's peaceful nuclear development did not find favour among the Pakistani strategic elite, which started drifting away from the United States. Pakistan's relations with China became stronger, and using China as a conduit, Pakistan sought a rapprochement with Russia. Pakistan was certain that the US strategy in Afghanistan was faulty, lacking a clear mission, and hence unlikely to succeed, and that it also fuelled trans-border problems for Pakistan. The mistaken Pakistani perspective that the United States was facilitating India to exploit the strategic vacuum in Afghanistan thereby threatening Pakistani strategic interests, further strengthened its resolve to develop stronger ties with Russia.

WEIRD FLIRTATION

Pakistan and Russia could never foster close ties due to mutual distrust of the other's intention. The defence relationship gained traction after former President Musharraf's visit to Moscow in February 2003, and Russian PM's visit to Pakistan in 2007. As per SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), the period from 1947 to 1991, the erstwhile USSR exported military equipment worth just US\$ 383 million to Pakistan, and from 1991, Russia directly gave military equipment worth US\$ 429 million, with US\$ 314 million coming in the decade spanning 2002 to 2012 primarily comprising Mi-17 helicopters.¹⁰

Pakistan also realised that India's tilt towards the US was irritating the Russians who were just waiting for an opportunity to settle scores. The open declaration of the QUAD was the final straw for Russia, which decided to deepen its relations with Pakistan. In Russia's opinion Pakistan today stands as a key player in the surfacing transnational politics in Eurasia. Despite its lack of conventional military parity with India, Pakistan effectively takes advantage of its unique geophysical location, a strong military that functions as the deep state, an advancing nuclear capability ably aided by China, and though waning but sizeable influence in the Islamic world in its pursuit for greatness and its management of international relations. Nascent Russia-Pakistan relations are developing under these changing geopolitical circumstances in South Asia. The past decade has witnessed a steady growth in the Russia-Pakistan military relations, which occurred concurrently with the consolidation of the US-India strategic partnership. This period also witnessed a steady decline in the US-Russian relations and also a frosty turn for US-Pakistan relations

Pakistan and Russia have both displayed an equal eagerness to normalise and deepen their strategic relations. To cement this fact Russia and Pakistan began working on establishing a bilateral defence relationship, probably with China's nudge. In November 2014, the Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu visited Islamabad and signed an agreement on Bilateral Defence Cooperation, and interestingly this was the first visit to Pakistan of a Soviet/

10. Uma Purushothaman, "The Russia-Pakistan Rapprochement: Should India Worry?" *ORF Issue Brief*, Issue No. 117, November 2015.

Russian Defence Minister in 45 years, the last having been by Andrei Grechko in 1969.¹¹ Russia went a step further and moved Pakistan from List-C to List-B countries for defence exports much to the surprise of the Indians. In 2015, the Russian Deputy National Security Advisor Yevgeny Lukyanov initiated an MoU on cooperation between Russia's National Security Council and Pakistan's National Security Division; and at the Financial Action Task Force meet (Brisbane, June 2015), Russia opposed India's move seeking censure of Pakistan for its inaction against the LeT-JuD combine.¹² There are speculations that are not unfounded that South Asia, in the immediate future, might witness a swap of alliances, with India going into the American fold and Pakistanis joining the Russian camp.

INDIA'S HEAD VERSUS HEART CONFLICT

The India-Russia relationship began as early as 1947, and remarkably, the Indians established diplomatic relations before India was formally declared independent. Even more interestingly, the first contact between the Indians and the Russians about establishing diplomatic relations took place in Beijing, then known as Peking, a strange twist of fate involving the three countries. But that is a small historical vignette. It is a historical fact that both India and Russia enjoyed many decades of deep-rooted connections at all levels during the erstwhile Soviet era, and India was beneficiary of the Soviet benevolence. It would never forget the unstinted support rendered by the USSR during the 1971 India-Pakistan War. During the periods of the Cold War and India's own non-alignment policies, India was looking up to the USSR to counter various pressing strategic issues posed by Pakistan. The unwavering support of the erstwhile Soviet Union ensured India's steady advancement in the fields of space, technology and nuclear progress. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Friendship treaty ensured the unwavering support of the USSR during the India-Pakistan war in 1971, when both the US and China chose to side with

11. M Haider, "Russian defence minister arrives in Pakistan to discuss defence cooperation", *Dawn*, November 20, 2014, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1145759>. Accessed on May 21, 2021.

12. Kuldip Singh, "Pakistan and Russia: Increasing cooperation?", *The Financial Express*, April 19, 2019, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/pakistan-and-russia-increasing-cooperation/2235918>. Accessed on May 21, 2021.

Pakistan. Since then, relations have further improved, which has resulted in the expansion of cooperation. The cooperation in the fields of military and technology was the mainstay of this bilateral relationship. The majority of the maintenance personnel for Indian armaments and support equipment were of Soviet and Russian origin. These weapons were battle tested and have proved invaluable over the past six decades.

The valued relations between both the countries ensured that Russia always viewed India through a favourable prism but strictly avoided playing any role in resolving the India and Pakistan differences. In addition, Russia was also not certain about the future of Pakistan and its intended role in South Asia. However, understandably, Russia is balancing its own interests in the region depending upon the economic leverage and strategic gains that it is likely to reap when it develops close contact with a nation. Russia also fully understands that Pakistan is a small country with its own internal problems despite its strategic location. Further, Pakistan stands nowhere in comparison to India's economic growth and influence over major nations.

The deal that made the Indians wary of Russian duplicity was the one for the aircraft carrier which forced India to pass through an extremely difficult phase. India's unpleasant experience with Russia over the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov in which India was forced to pay more than the cost of a new aircraft carrier due to arm twisting by the Russians, left Indians wary. The inflated costs, undue delay and constant threat by the Russian officials left Indians bitter, and hence a well-considered decision was made that all future purchases should be from different countries rather than being totally dependent on a single country and succumbing to technological blackmail.¹³

The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation agreement signed in 2008 was a clear indicator that India was swaying towards the US, and it had ramifications on its equation with Russia. The civil nuclear agreement after certain ratifications in 2008, was followed by some big ticket defence

13. "INS Vikramaditya—Russian Build Aircraft Carrier Is A Disaster?", January 3, 2020, at <https://eurasianimes.com/ins-vikramaditya-russian-build-aircraft-carrier-is-a-disaster-oped-by-national-interest>. Accessed on June 21, 2021.

India-Russia relationship appears to be undergoing a historic shift. Going back to the Cold War, it had been a warm and enduring relationship. It gained a reputation for being a stable, predictable partnership driven in particular by a strong defence relationship. But in recent years it has experienced a number of challenges. Each country has deepened its partnership with the other's rivals.

purchases from the US, which created an invisible wall in the India-Russia relations.

Washington's Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which threatens sanctions on any country purchasing Russian military equipment, has significantly complicated security partnerships for the US in Asia, particularly with India, Vietnam and Indonesia. This has infuriated the Russians, who believe the Americans are attempting to weaken their traditional markets for arm sales. Despite India's proximity, no exceptions have been made. A point to ponder here is that successive US presidents Trump and Biden were not in favour of sanctions against India over its purchase of the S-400 defence missile

systems. If India decides to continue extending its security partnership with the US, both on a country-to-country basis or through the yet to take off QUAD, there would be significant pressure mainly from the US, and probably other members, to minimise its defence purchase from Russia. This would clearly infringe on India's strategic freedom and place it in a delicate position trying to match its strategic imperatives.

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RUSSIAN DIPLOMACY OF PRESSURE AGAINST INDIA

In international relations there is no reason for a country to object to collaborating with a third country if its strategic interests are not threatened. On those lines when Russia sells defence equipment to either Pakistan or Russia, India might not object as long as it does not imperil its national security. In this case both Pakistan and China are the avowed rivals of India, and certainly Russian armaments are going to play a crucial role in India's security architecture. Based on the same theory,

India seeking a deeper military partnership with the United States should not concern Russia, as India is not bound to use them to threaten Russia's strategic interests. Desire cannot overcome reality. Russia is apparently trying to brand India guilty by association.

The probable proximity in the Russia-Pakistan ties owes to the growing cooperation between India and the United States especially in the defence sector. The inking of certain Indo-American agreements over cooperation in defence (such as Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and an ongoing purchase of American Apache and Chinook helicopters by India generated anger in Russia, as they believed their traditional market was being poached. To add to the Russian discomfort, was the decrease in import of Moscow's hardware by India, while the Americans, French and the Israelis have made inroads in the Indian defence market.¹⁴ Russia has started to show its displeasure towards India in more than one way. Russia, for the first time, cancelled the annual bilateral summit with India on the

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India generated an anger
in Russia, as they believed
their traditional market
was being poached.**

14. Iwanek, K., "Russia's Looming Arms Sale to Pakistan sets up a dangerous game", at <https://thediomat.com/2019/05/russias-looming-arms-sale-to-pakistan-sets-up-a-dangerous-game>. Accessed on May 14, 2021.

excuse of COVID pandemic and is rebalancing and recalibrating its strategic relationship with various regional actors, notably Pakistan.

India wanted to bring up the February 2019 Pulwama attack, in which 47 of its CRPF personnel were killed in a Pakistan-sponsored terror attack, in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation forum. To its utter surprise both Russia and China refused to entertain the plea and suggested a bilateral solution. This action by Russia was a clear indicator to the Pakistanis that their relations with Russia was likely to improve. Meanwhile, as a clear mark of political craftsmanship, the Russians voted for an India-sponsored move to designate the head of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), a Pakistan-based and sponsored terrorist organisation considered responsible for the convoy attack in Pulwama, as an international terrorist organisation in the United Nations Security Council. Thus, Russia was putting forth a message that it can hold both the countries on tenterhooks.

Russia arranged for a meeting of four nations in 2010 in Moscow to discuss Afghanistan. The notable absentee was India, and the participants in addition to Russia included Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. This summit ensured Pakistan earned brownie points as India was deliberately excluded from the summit at the behest of Pakistan.

The military relationship between Russia and China has become increasingly close: in addition to conventional weapons, Russia is also helping China set up its missile early warning system, one of the most sensitive bits of technology for any nuclear power. It may not come as a surprise that the Chinese showdown in Ladakh region in 2020, leading to a prolonged standoff between India and China may have had Russia's tacit blessing. The resultant outcome was India's distress purchase of fighter aircraft from Russia worth US\$ 780 million. The aircraft purchase, under normal circumstances, would have not been made, and gives room for suspicion that Russia played a masterstroke in selling off its redundant arms. Russia had not been critical of China's transgression into India's area.

RUSSIA-PAKISTAN: CHILLING CONSONANCES

The Russian military doctrine is difficult to interpret and leaves room for deliberation. One school of thought holds that Russia would not hesitate to use its nuclear weapons when confronted by a superior conventional force with the sole objective of ensuring the non-escalation of a conflict. Such an explanation reverberates closely with Pakistani rationale of its deterrence strategies. Russian declaratory nuclear policy ensures national survival. This doctrine of Russia is in consonance with the Pakistani line of thinking on use of nuclear weapons. The two countries were probably the only ones discounting North Korea as an irrational player. The geopolitical scenario emerging is probably the reason that Russia believes that an armed confrontation with the forces of NATO might become inevitable over the Crimean issue. This probably has propelled Vladimir Putin to additionally augment his nuclear forces as it would ensure a strategic parity and deter the NATO forces from imitating pre-emptive military operations. The message is intended to be communicated not only to the NATO countries, but also to China, that Russia would never be a pushover. Pakistan also shares the same sentiments and is of the strong opinion that its nuclear arsenal would deter India from any misadventures.

PAKISTAN'S BEE IN THE BONNET POLICY

Pakistan finds itself in a quandary as it feels that it would become a buffer between an aggressive US and a belligerent China, as the two big rivals are moving towards a likely conflict. Pakistan's proximity to China and its strategic relations with the US places it in the crosshairs of both the countries. Further, Pakistan would be deeply concerned with India's growing proximity to the US, which will lead to India achieving conventional military superiority. Pakistan's strategic geopolitical location and its strong ties with China can be an asset and also a liability. China has constantly given every kind of assistance to counter India, and on the flip side, the perceived closeness of Pakistan with China has put it in the crosshairs of the US. Numerous instances have strained the US-Pakistan alliance, the most notable being the Abbottabad raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and

an accidental cross-fire incident in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border leading to the death of a number of Pakistani troops.

In the wake of deteriorating relations between the United States and Pakistan, the then Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan General Ashfaq Kayani visited Russia in 2011 and requested for a consideration of Pakistani defence requirements. The General was able to convince the Russians of the new political approach of Pakistan and implored Russia to reconsider its policy of placing Pakistan on the proscribing arms sale list, stating that he was willing even for patchwork acquisitions.¹⁵

The Pakistani army chief's visit paved the way for the then Pakistan Air Chief Marshal Tahir Rafiq Butt's to visit Russia in August 2012, who also extended an invitation to his Russian counterpart. The Russian Air Chief Viktor Bondarev's reciprocal visit to Islamabad in April 2013 started sowing the seeds of a steadily growing partnership. The Russians deliberated for about two years before deciding to lift the arms embargo to Pakistan in 2015, much to the dismay of India. Hitherto, India was always taken into confidence prior to any arms sales for Pakistan, and the lifting of the embargo was a clear indicator that Russia would not be bound by Indian sentiments, paving the way for the emergence of a new Russia with an increased strategic role in the South Asian region.

The growing relations between Pakistan and Russia were increasingly worrisome for the Americans, and as a consequence the US President Donald Trump had terminated Pakistan's participation in America's International Military Education Program. This led to Pakistan and Russia signing the "Security Training Agreement," which facilitates the training of Pakistani military officers in Russian military institutions, a first of its kind. Till date India has not been sending any of its officer trainees to Russia for *ab-initio* training or vice versa. Both Pakistan and Russia are keeping the extent of their cooperation under wraps, unlike the flaunting of Pakistan's relationship with China. But the writing on the wall is quite clear that Pakistan and Russia are deepening their partnership by the day.

15. Kamal Alam, "Growing Pakistan–Russia Military Ties Reflect Central Asia's Changing Geopolitics", RUSI, October 12, 2017, at <https://rusi.org/commentary/growing-pakistan%E2%80%9393russia-military-ties-reflect-central-asia%E2%80%99s-changing-geopolitics>. Accessed on June 21, 2021.

Pakistan intends to play an important role in crafting the future trajectory of the Russia-China-Pakistan triangle. It comes as no surprise that both Pakistan and Russia are in consonance over the role and participation of the Taliban in an Afghan government likely to be formed after the exit of the allied troops from Afghanistan. Russia deems Pakistan as a star player and accords undue importance over the unstinted support extended to the Taliban by Pakistan, which buried the NATO's campaign in Afghanistan. Russia is fully aware of Pakistan's deadly potential in unleashing jihadi elements across the region and destabilising regimes, and hence does not want an unstable Central Asia. Pakistan's importance in this game to Russia was amply demonstrated when an invitation was extended to participate in talks to determine the future of Afghanistan, alongside the US and China.

There are ongoing talks about possible collaboration and technological transfer from Russia to Pakistan. The Pakistani wish list includes Kalashnikov rifles, ammunitions for its tanks and associated equipment. Despite its severe financial crunch Pakistan has expressed an interest in procuring some high-end Russian weaponry that includes the S-400 air defence system, additional Mi-35 Helicopter gunships, the latest SU-35 Fighter aircraft, T-90 tanks, as well as solicited nuclear cooperation. Russia is fully aware of the track record of Pakistan's nuclear proliferation and yet chooses to remain silent. The probable cause is the Pakistan-US estrangement coupled with a good word from China that is pushing Pakistan closer to Russia. Pakistan's strategic geopolitical location, has increased its importance to the Russian long-term interests. According to a report, Pakistan plans to link the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with the Eurasian Economic Union. Despite the proclaimed proximity between both the nations, Russia can ill afford the friendship prices or subsidies that used to be a hallmark of the erstwhile Soviet regime. Russia is itself in an economically vulnerable position, and hence would not be able to sell arms at reduced prices and Pakistan is desperately seeking loans to repay its earlier loans. The IMF has expressed reservations to provide Pakistan with yet another bailout package, which would be the twelfth if offered, owing to Pakistan being continually featured in the FATF

The reality of India's relations with Russia came to the fore when Russia conducted bilateral exercises with both India and Pakistan, a dichotomy in itself.

grey list as a sponsor of terror.¹⁶ It may not come as a surprise if other nations including Saudi Arabia and UAE try to bail out Pakistan by funding their arms purchases.

RUSSIA-PAKISTAN FRIENDSHIP DRILLS

In a strange twist of history, opposing sides came together after almost four decades when the Pakistani and the then Soviets militaries were indirectly involved in a conflict since 1979 that lasted close to a decade in the unforgiving terrains of Afghanistan, where the Soviets had invaded to establish a friendly regime. Pakistan's support for the Afghan insurgency then was unwavering as it had the blessings of the US. Currently Pakistan still lends all support to the Taliban except for the fact that the Taliban is fighting the NATO forces headed by the US. Now ironically, both Russia and Pakistan are conducting military drills and have termed these as friendship drills. These drills represent a noteworthy shift from the shared hatred of the 1980s, while also creating newer opportunities for Pakistan to emerge as a key player in the region.

The reality of India's relations with Russia came to the fore when Russia conducted bilateral exercises with both India and Pakistan, a dichotomy in itself. The Indian troops were hosted for the exercise in Russia, while the Russian troops were participating in an exercise with the Pakistani forces in Pakistani territory in 2016. The earlier joint naval drills, the Arabian Monsoon-2014 and Arabian Monsoon-2015, carried out by Russia and Pakistan, were merely anti-narcotic drills and never had any real military element in them. In a significant shift, the recent joint drill Druzhba-2016 was an out and out military exercise with elements of assault troops from both countries engaging in simulated battle and adversary elimination operations. There was an array of weaponry used in this exercise which included the latest assault rifles, and specialised sniper rifles. The Pakistani

16. B. D. Mehra, "Russia and Pakistan: Strange Bedfellows", CENJOWS Publication, Synodos Paper VOL - XIII NO-4 / APR 2019.

Air Force partook in the concluding phase at the Cherat training range.¹⁷

Russian and Pakistani special operation troops conducted joint military drills in November 2020 at the Tarbela training grounds in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunwah province as part of the "Friendship 2020 exercise".¹⁸ Russian, Chinese and Iranian naval warships were among the 45 nations warships that actively participated in the AMAN-21 naval exercise. This exercise is a biennial affair hosted by Pakistan and the ships drill in the Arabian Sea on February 16, 2021.

Russia has already started selling arms and ammunitions to Pakistan since 2015, despite serious Indian reservations. The erstwhile USSR and post-disintegration Russia adhered to a strict rule of not selling weapons to Pakistan, and remained a steadfast, strategic and political partner, and continued being the sole vast supplier of military merchandise to India. This, approach underwent a change since 2014, when both Russia and Pakistan deepened their resolve to strengthen their bilateral defence relations and accordingly inked a pact. The pact facilitated future purchases and was the harbinger for the initial purchase military hardware by Pakistan from Russia. It was in 2015 that Russia decided to sell the MI-35 attack helicopters, an offensive weapon of war to Pakistan. The Pakistani Army's armoured formations field the Ukrainian-80 UD tanks, while its Army Aviation holds about 50 Mi-17 helicopters.

Russia and China both are in agreement against an international system largely dominated by the USA and other Western powers. Yet their equations are complicated and compounded by mutual distrust. There is an economic disparity that China wields over Russia in Asia, but Russia makes it up with its political might.

17. Kanishka Singh, "Russia risks derailing healthy relationship with India with Pak bonhomie", October 13, 2016, *The Indian Express*, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/web-edits/russia-risks-derailing-healthy-relationship-with-india-with-pak-bonhomie-3080321>. Accessed on June 21, 2021.

18. "Russian Special Forces Arrive In Islamabad For Military Drills With Pakistan Army", latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News, November 5, 2020, at <https://eurasianimes.com/russian-special-forces-arrive-in-islamabad-for-military-drills-with-pakistan-army>. Accessed on June 21, 2021.

RUSSIA-CHINA: ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Russia and China both are in agreement against an international system largely dominated by the US and other Western powers. Yet their equations are complicated and compounded by mutual distrust. There is an economic disparity that China wields over Russia in Asia, but Russia makes it up with its political might. Russia's drift from the Western nations over multiple events and issues has forced Russia to accept the Chinese as the dominant partner in their consensual relationship. Europe's vast market potential would compel China to rethink its policy of taking on the international system head-on. This has all the ingredients to cause serious differences in the strategic partnership between Russia and China. China has been Pakistan's primary supplier of weaponry to date, and an entry by the Russians with their superior military hardware would lead to a competition much against China's interest and wishes.

In Central Asia, to Russia's dismay, the Chinese have started to expand their sphere of influence and Beijing has emerged as a key player, much to the discomfort of Russia. The Chinese influence certainly dents Russia's hold on the Eurasian Economic Union to counter the China's Belt and Road Initiative. The economic growth of Russia's eastern region is an inescapable necessity and to fuel the growth a big investment from China is also an absolute necessity, but the promised investments from China is not forthcoming on Russian terms, as China tries to maximise profits from all investments.

The Chinese are extremely keen on spreading their tentacles into the Arctic to exploit the untapped resources of the region for their own economic benefits, and would gain immensely by partnering with Russia and enhance their global economic standing. This move by the Chinese poses serious problems for the Russians, as they guard the Arctic as their dominion and the presence of any outside power would pale its influence in the region. This power asymmetry will continue to grow at the expense of the Russians.

The benefit for the Chinese companies operating out of Russia would be better knowledge of cutting-edge technology, which would facilitate the increased expertise of Chinese manufacturing in the fields of hydro-

carbon and aircraft manufacturing at the international level. These are clear indicators of the course of the relationship and amply bring out the clout that China is likely to wield in this lopsided partnership.

However, the Russians are a proud people, and whether they will play second fiddle to China's interest remains to be seen. It is an accepted fact that Russia stands nowhere near China's economic prowess. The only thing they contribute significantly to this asymmetric relationship is their complete domination of arms manufacture. Russians are wary of incurring debts with the Chinese and have not availed any loans from China, not wanting to fall into the trap of China's cheque book diplomacy. The main disappointment for leaders in Russia had been the minimal flow of investment from China.

The bonhomie between Russia and China is likely to live through for a period of time, due to congruence of common interests. To step up their domination one can witness the active participation of both Russia and China in a number of multinational forums, like the United Nations where both countries being the permanent members of the UNSC ensure that their interests and foreign policies are in consonance when compared with the voting patterns of the US, UK and France. Their votes are often identical and they voice similar views on Iran and North Korea. Both have increased their stakes in West Asia, where Russia is fast emerging as a dominating power, which it had lost over the decades to American ascendancy and China's attempts to build strategic partnerships with Iran.¹⁹ The Russian-Chinese military bonhomie has been growing steadily and beginning 2015 there have been routine naval drills conducted in the Mediterranean, Black and Baltic Seas. In addition they have had joint exercises in the Yellow, East China and South China Seas, as well as the Seas of Japan and Okhotsk, an indicator to the steady partnership between both the countries. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, or SIPRI, an international institute that provides information on military expenditure and arms trade, revealed that between 2016 and 2020, China had imported arms from various sources, with a staggering 77 percent

19. Kate Bartlett, "What Makes Strange Diplomatic Bedfellows?" OZY.com, March 24, 2021, at <https://www.ozy.com/around-the-world/what-makes-strange-diplomatic-bedfellows/425721>. Accessed on May 3, 2021.

of its arms imports coming from Russia, a clear indication of the growing closeness between the two countries.²⁰

INDIA'S AIR POWER DILEMMA

The Pakistani Air Force (PAF) has four Ukrainian-supplied IL-78 Aerial Refuelling aircraft, equipped with Russian-designed UPAZ refuelling pods, as well as the Czech-origin Vera-E emitter locator (passive radar) systems. Russian-manufactured RD-93 engines are now powering the Pakistan-China joint venture JF-17 fighter aircraft. The JF-17 Thunder is a fighter aircraft designed by China and produced jointly by the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group in China and Pakistan at its Aeronautical Complex, Kamra. The JF-17 is ostensibly a fourth-generation, multi-role aircraft. The PAF has currently about 70 numbers of JF 17 on its inventory, and there are indicators of another 100 being on order to replace its ageing fleet of fighter aircraft.²¹

The JF-17, is reportedly a low-priced, multi-role lightweight fighter aircraft and accommodates precision-guided weapons, embedded with modern avionics and electronics systems and has been proclaimed to be among the best fighter aircraft in the price range it commands. This aircraft is being primarily developed and rapidly inducted to supplant the A-5C, F-7P/PG, Mirage III, and Mirage V, which are well beyond their shelf lives and currently still in service with the PAF. While India's Tejas, which is intended to replace the Indian Air Force's MiG-21 fleet and may be a much superior aircraft, but the Chinese-Pakistani JF-17 project started much later and delivered a lot earlier. The first LCA entered service in July 2016 after 30 years of the commencement of the project and till July 2020 a full four years after its induction a total of only 20 aircraft had been handed over. Despite the initial build rate suffering as HAL had to work to resolve certain outstanding issues related to design and production of the airframes, the manufacturers have been unable to produce more than five aircraft each year. The IAF has hit a record low of

20. Anita Inder Singh, "Russia's Asia Diplomacy", at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-s-asia-diplomacy>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

21. AK Sachdeva, "Air Threat from PLAAF & PAF", at <http://www.sps-aviation.com/story/?id=2385&h=Air-Threat-from-PLAAF-and-PAF>. Accessed on May 27, 2021.

30 fighter squadrons against the government-authorised 42, and unless the depleting strength is replenished the IAF would lose the clear combat edge that it had enjoyed over the PAF in 1971, both in terms of quality and quantity. Technology-intensive air power requires accelerated replacement of assets due to quicker obsolescence.²² The availability of a sizeable number of operational JF-17 with the PAF, and even if some are lost in an aerial battle against the IAF, they can be easily supplemented by the PLAAF, which operates the same inventory with minimal issues on induction and operationalisation. The scales of attrition will certainly begin to favour PAF.

Pakistan has been finding it going tough to acquire even the outdated F-16s, and hence the chances of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) acquiring the F-35 from the US are weaker. Due to the proximity and closeness that has developed between Pakistan and China in the fields of armaments and military technology over the years, the possibilities of passing any American technology obtained through weapons purchases from the US will loom large. In the absence of the American F-35, the PAF will have to be content acquiring a makeshift stealth jet from China, which currently has two ongoing parallel projects. The larger aircraft among the two, The J-20 is a bigger aircraft as compared to the nimble J-31, and is reportedly a model absolutely akin to the US F-22 and being built to serve the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) strategic requirements, whilst the smaller and more nimble J-31 would be the export model.²³

The fact that China uses Pakistan as a testing ground to evaluate its armaments the likelihood of Pakistan being the maiden customer for the J-31 is very high. The economy of Pakistan is in a bad shape, and hence would be unable to afford these expensive jets. But China has been a regular supplier of weaponry to Pakistan for a long time, may agree to provide the J-31 at a no-profit or no-loss basis just at the cost price which

22. Air Marshal Anil Chopra, "Turnaround of the IAF Fighter Fleet", *Indian Defence Review*, at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/turnaround-of-the-iaf-fighter-fleet>. Accessed on May 28, 2021.

23. Dipanjan Roy Choudhry, "America says China's fifth-generation jet fighter J-31 stolen from its F-35", (n.d.), *The Economic Times*, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/america-says-chinas-fifth-generation-jet-fighter-j-31-stolen-from-its-f-35/articleshow/49762382.cms>. Accessed on May 28, 2021.

The potential sale of Su-35s to Pakistan can alter the power dynamics between India and tip the balance in favour of Pakistan, which has been moping over the idea of acquiring the Russian S-400 air defence system.

could be a bonanza for Pakistan. Alternatively, Pakistan can always manage to rummage loans that will ultimately be converted as grants from Saudi Arabia or friendly Islamic nations. The underlying factor will be the PAF acquiring the J-31 and Pakistan's game plan would be to licence and produce the J-31, and absorb its technology. The presence of a stealth fighter in the inventory of the PAF would tip the scales dramatically in favour of the PAF.

Pakistan has been seeking the state of the art SU-35 from Russia and if this deal bears fruit, the SU-35s would plug a protracted capability gap for the Pakistan Air Force, as the service lacks a heavyweight twin-engine air superiority fighter in its arsenal to counter the Indian Air Force. Pakistan's envisaged interest in the SU-35 is primarily consumed by the PAF's requirement of an aircraft that possesses a range superior to the JF-17 and can facilitate deep penetration into the enemy's territory, thereby placing Indian interior strategic assets within the striking range of PAF jets. The potential sale of Su-35s to Pakistan can alter the power dynamics between India and tip the balance in favour of Pakistan, which has been moping over the idea of acquiring the Russian S-400 air defence system. The Russian S-400 missile is considered the most lethal air defence system in the world, with the capability of bringing down advanced fighters and India would find it difficult to penetrate Pakistani air defences for carrying out punitive air strikes. The availability of these missile systems with the PLAAF and PAF would pose enormous problems for the Indian fighters to operate both in the eastern and western fronts. India's air defence capability would have to be reshaped to counter the threat from this system in the hands of the adversaries.

It is generally a guide post that a country benefits most in the battlefield whenever its weapons systems are as integrated as possible. It becomes demanding when many suppliers are involved, an unfortunate paradigm that India may be subjected to with its arsenal of aircraft both from the West and

the East. But the bulk of the PAF inventory is of the Chinese origin, barring the F-16s, making the integration considerably easier and positioning the PAF in a favourable position.

Russia is actively assisting China in developing an early-warning missile defence system, and Russia's decades of experience operating early-warning missile and considerable technology and operational experience will be shared with China. In the event of a confrontation between India and China the Russian built S-400 may prove formidable, and probably can intercept the Indian cruise missile Brahmos and nullify India's advantage. Russia's supply of such systems with advanced early warning capabilities to China assumes strategic significance from all angles. It increases China's air defence potential to protect itself from missile strikes by India. Thus, the Russian involvement with both Pakistan and China has several far-reaching consequences for the Indian Air Force.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

First, Russia wants to send a discreet message to India that if New Delhi can distance itself from Russia, then Moscow can as well, and they are doing it through Pakistan, where it pinches the most. Second, Pakistan and Russia have a common friend—China. China would ideally want Russia to invest in China's BRI and CPEC projects. This would, according to Islamabad, limit Indian objections and interferences in the region as Pakistan has consistently blamed India for sabotaging the CPEC project.²⁴

There are increasing signs that India is steadily moving into the American strategic calculus with accelerated cooperation on the spheres of defence, space, and cutting-edge technologies. Further, India signing strategic

24. Smriti Chaudhary, "Red Flag in India as Russia Getting Dangerously Close To Pakistan after Arch-Rival China", December 23, 2020, at <https://eurasianimes.com/red-flag-in-india-as-russia-getting-dangerously-close-to-pakistan-after-arch-rival-china>. Accessed on May 24, 2021.

agreements like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) are all pointers to the growing strategic partnership. This growing proximity between India and the US, in the eyes of many astute strategic experts, denotes an almost complete military alliance and it also sends a subtle signal to China that India would not hesitate to leverage the support to confront China. The growing proximity between India and the US might kindle Russia's desire to take a call on its time-tested friendship with India and review its strategic options. The resultant supply of cutting-edge technologies offered by Russia might be stopped and contrarily might be provided to Pakistan, posing a strategical risk for India.

An article on hybrid warfare published in December 2018 in the Pakistani daily *Dawn* by former Pakistani Ambassador Munir Akram, a renowned and highly regarded strategic analyst, drew attention to the Gerasimov doctrine. The doctrine was attributed to a Russian military general who developed a far-reaching approach that was effectively applied in Ukraine. In the article, the author confirms that the Russians applied a multi-pronged attack on Ukraine that involved a deadly combination of narrative control through psychological operations, target specific cyberattacks, nameless fighters and irregular forces, covert supply chain, and a veiled diplomatic support, all of which fell under the category of asymmetrical operations and grey-zone warfare. This complex stratagem is not an all-out war, but a form of stratagem intended to erode and dent the opponent's national power and a will to resist against such operations.²⁵ This new art of war has caught the imagination of the Pakistani strategic think tanks as well. Ambassador Akram acknowledges that this new form of warfare is gaining prominence and has the promise to become increasingly sophisticated with newer technologies, such as autonomous weapons, artificial intelligence and cyber tools blur the distinction between conventional and hybrid warfare. With future Russian collaboration Pakistan can gain substantially in this form of warfare and once perfected and used against India it can have serious destabilising consequences?

25. Akram, M., "Hybrid warfare", *Dawn*, December 9, 2018, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1450346> Accessed on May 21, 2021.

The joint military exercises and exchanges between Pakistan and Russia are still in a nascent stage. But, if conducted on a regular basis, these would lead to a better tactical and operational coordination with a firmer grasp of each other's concepts. It would be only a matter of time before Russia and Pakistan have strategic and doctrinal influence on each other's thinking.

CONCLUSION

It can be effectively concluded that, given Russia's permanent geopolitical game plan and heterogeneity of its economy, the positives witnessed in Russia's engagement with Pakistan and China will continue in the same trajectory for the foreseeable future. There is a clear ground to believe that a new strategic troika of Russia-China-Pakistan is emerging in order to counterbalance the US and its allies including India. Though the current Russia-Pakistan strategic relationship is in an emerging phase, the enhanced frequency of exchanges has happened at a pace much faster than anticipated. Russian military doctrines may not yet have found a place in Pakistan strategic thinking, but the ongoing closeness between the two is now glaringly clear. China is spearheading the new strategic triangle of R-C-P (Russia, China and Pakistan), and the emergence of the QUAD 3.0 hastened its formal arrival on the geopolitical scene.

This new R-C-P axis does not augur well for India's geopolitical interests, and it is highly unlikely that the rise of China can be peaceful indefinitely, as being witnessed in Ladakh and South China Sea. The growing Russia Pakistan bonhomie could thus, be termed as a retribution to India's proximity to the US, at a time the Indo-Russian relationship is facing testing times and risks derailment. This partnership flourishing under the tacit approval of China would put India at a great strategic disadvantage in fulfilling its long-term interests, and India must closely monitor and make necessary course corrections.