

Russia's South Asia Policy, Russia-China-Pakistan Strategic Axis and Indian Concerns

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ABSTRACT

Russia's South Asia policy since Cold War times has remained Indo-Centric. In the 1990's, after its disintegration and in the 21st century it remained same to the larger extent. However, in the 21st century several geopolitical changes befallen, predominantly the increased Indo-US strategic partnership, which brought certain modifications in Russia's South Asia policy. Over the last several years, it has been strongly propelled by the new developments that led to the emergence of Russia-China-Pakistan strategic Axis. This strategic trio certainly poses several regional concerns for India and ultimately cooling effect to Indo-Russian relations. Hence, if not being resorted to, the strategic trio would emerge as the unbeatable nerve-racking force in the region and an important force to distance India and Russia. Hence, the study endeavours to analyse the change in Russia's South Asian policy leading to emergence of strategic axis while coming in orchestra with Pakistan and China. It also traces the implications of this new power equation on India. The study argues that the changes in Russia's South Asia policy bring down its Indo-Centric tone. No doubt, its relations with India are still strong and big but the given the rising concerns of the emergent strategic trio India must remain wary of this new dynamic and tailor its policies accordingly.

Keywords: *Russia's South Asia Policy, Indo-Russian Relations, Strategic Partnership, Strategic Axis, India's concerns, India's strategy.*

Introduction

During the Cold War period, the USSR's policy towards South Asia has remained emphatically Indo-Centric. The Russia had recognized the geopolitical weight and centrality of India in the South Asian region and therefore had developed strong relations with India. It also reached out to Pakistan, who otherwise moved into the western camp and developed the relations later with China, the Soviet Union's ideological rival. This overturn by Pakistan aroused aversion from the USSR's side which began to support the India's preeminence over Pakistan and strongly helped India in political, economic and strategic terms. The US on the other hand supported its non-NATO ally Pakistan against India.

Since the USSR undergone disintegration in 1990, the following decade its policy towards South Asia come under great speculation having largely witnessed the development of relations with the West particularly the US. However, very soon, Russian establishment realized that west is not giving due consideration to Russian state of affairs and are busy in clutching the benefit by aggrandizing its sphere of influence, expansion of NATO and support to the expansion of European Union. Hence, instead of relying on the west particularly the US, Russia began to diversify its policy courtesies (Mankoff, 2009). Owing well off to its geopolitical profile and resurgence in the 21st century, it redefined its South Asia policy. As India, Russia's Cold War reliable partner developed strong strategic partnership with the US, Russia move towards China and Pakistan. Over the last several years, particularly after the sanctions on Russia in 2014 in the wake of Crimea's annexation, these developments exhibit greater pace. Russia comes in strong political, diplomatic, military and strategic dealings with the China and Pakistan (Luken, 2017). While provided base by the already build matrix of China-Pakistan axis these led to emergence of a strategic trio between Russia, China and Pakistan. These overturns resulted from the changing shifts in Russia's South Asia policy for which large causative factor is the increasing dominance of the US and its regional influence through the Indo-US strategic relationship. However, these possess several concerns for India and in fact threat to the historicity of its relations with Russia. Hence, India has to fix the policy to manage the ambience between the US and Russia and develop relations with other powers without losing its position from the foreign policy priority list of its time tested friend.

USSR's South Asia Policy: India as Lynchpin

During the Cold War period, USSR exercised several exertions to maintain and exercise influence in the South Asian region. Several ins and outs particularly the neutralization of the US and China influence were responsible for Soviet engrossment towards South Asia. While its policy was guided towards South Asia, the

Soviet Union consistently recognized the significance of India to strengthen its political, economic and diplomatic mainstay towards the region (Kapur, 1983). It had made India epicenter of its policy towards South Asia. India also reacted positively since its socialistic preferences drove it towards the Soviet Union. USSR also tried to reach out to its southern nadir Pakistan. It had never fastened the doors for Pakistan. However, the misunderstandings and misperceptions always crept in, as a result of which stabs failed to seize the moments except for certain high level visits and bilateral projects like steel mill in Pakistan concluded during the Zulfikar Ail Bhutto's tenure (Hussain, 2012).

Since, USSR was greatly endorsing India, Pakistan began to look to Soviet Union through the prism of its relations with India. Pakistan belly up to the US and maneuver the US card to counterweigh fears of Indo-Soviet partnership. It joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), the western security system and become frontline state against war on communism (Rose & Husain, 1985). The US tendered extensive military assistance to Pakistan. Pakistan's involvement in pro-western multilateral alliance aroused distaste in USSR because it considered alliance as a premeditated part of the US containment strategy. Soviet Union again also experienced suspicion when Pakistan developed good relations with the China, the Russia's ideological rival. In the wake of these commotions aroused from the Pakistan's chumminess with USSR's both the enemies, the US and China, India emerged as the natural and inevitable partner of USSR (Malik, 2016). USSR began to achieve its objectives of South Asian preeminence by giving preferential treatment to India in relation to other South Asian countries particularly Pakistan. India also responded well irrespective of its non-alignment policy to rise to South Asian preeminence. The Soviet Union developed the bilateral relationship with India and Irrespective of the government in power in India, it greatly helped India both in terms of economic and military development (Hilali, 2006). Beginning was from the economic development area for which the kickoff was made by the Soviet Union's foreign aid program. Soviet Union provide greater economic assistance in the form of low priced economic credits that were repayable in rupees. In addition, Russia provided oil, fertilizers, metals and other materials. With the soviet cooperation large industrial infrastructure was developed like steel industry, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd (BHEL), Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) etc. (Mehrotra, 1990). From the military perspective the Indian military development is highly indebted to Russian military industrial complex. The military relationship led to the conclusion of Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation 1971, which greatly helped India. Russia put at service and provide military help like Mi-35, MiG-21 fighter jet etc. to India at a time when the US was reluctant to supply defense equipment. As the time flies, Russia emerged as the largest defense supplier to India and fulfill the demand of Indian military establishment (Hedrick, 2009).

Besides, Soviet Union also shared the interests and concerns on various issues and events both at the regional and international. It encouraged India to take decisions on several issues and events in line with its decisions. Despite, the non-alignment policy, India responded well to such Soviet aspiration and refrain from disparaging the Russia on regional and international issues and events. Moreover, it began to support USSR on a number of occasions and abstained from going against USSR's intervention in hungry, Czechoslovakia etc. It even did not publically oppose the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and abstain from voting to UN resolution demanding the termination of intervention (Nayudu, 2017). Through similar attempts USSR accorded great power status to India in 1962 war against China and act as pacifier in 1965 Indo-Pak war and Tashkent conference and on Kashmir issue. The treaty of 1971 proved supportive to India in the Indo-Pak war in 1971. In the war, USSR began to call India as "Great Asian Power". Soviet Union also used veto to provide India protective shield against the western attempts to work against India (Bakshi, 1999). In fact, USSR gave due consideration to India's position in the region. It provided great support to India's pretension of becoming a nuclear power. Albeit India conducted nuclear tests, Soviet Union did not defy it and agreed to provide the heavy water for the use in nuclear reactors when the US and Canada cut short the supply.

During the Cold War period Soviet Union did it primarily to maintain a balance in South Asian region. For the same it viewed the geopolitical and geostrategic weight of India as the lucrative venture. Given the threat of the US-Pak Alliance, India also responded well. Hence, USSR provided all support to India and emerged as the substantial role player for fulfilling the Indian craving of superiority over Pakistan in economic, political and strategic and military front areas. Soviet Union also reached out to Pakistan but their bilateral relationship in spite of not having any bilateral issue, had costed, as both contemplated it through the prism of their respective relations with other states.

Changing Contours of Russia's South Asia Policy

After the disintegration of Russia and with the emergence of the US uni-polarity in the world, Russia's policy and involvement in the world in general and South Asian region dwindled. Russia actually was crippled

under grave challenges both domestic and global. As a result of ensuing many priorities like national identity, economy, security and lost global position, it readjust its policy. It began to emphasize the liberal westernized view and embarked upon the task of making political and economic integration with the west (Simes, 1999). As evident from its various Foreign Policy doctrines/concepts made after disintegration, South Asia began to get low priority. South Asia was accorded seventh position in its foreign policy concept in Jan 1993 in the list of ten priorities. More importantly, it was without any separate mention of India. Russia which was long embracing India lost the strong tone. The security clause of The Treaty of Friendship 1971 was made scrawny by lowering the strength of security clause in 1992 (Shah, 2001). Russia even backtracks on Indo-Russian cryogenic deal under the US pressure (Bakshi, 1998). India also moved away from the Soviet Union, since it was to address its economic concerns which disintegrated Soviet Union would not fulfill. Hence, Russia's relations with its important South Asian geostrategic lynchpin India cooled. In addition, it was added with more fuel since Russia began to perceive its Indo-Centric attitude adverse to its relations with other South Asian countries, most noticeably Pakistan (Buszynski, 1992).

However, when Russia realized that west failed to help out Russia in achieving the policy objectives, Russia gave preference to balanced approach towards the west and east. As for the South Asia was concerned, the Russia began to realize that since it tried to integrate with west and show some inclinations towards Pakistan, the relations with India become paler. So, keeping in mind these factors, the pulls become identified towards revamping the ties with India. It was in the foreign policy concept 2000, Russia emphasized the desire for new world order with the development of relations with other countries to bring the multipolar world order (Tsygankov, 2016). With the beginning of the 21st century such policy became translated in practice on actual ground. It began to develop and revamp the ties with the major powers particularly China, India and Pakistan who are greatly involved in South Asian politics. Given the Russian resurgence, Moscow makes significant forays towards South Asia owing to various *raison d'être* particularly Indo-US strategic partnership (Tsygankov, 2012). As for as India is concerned, Russia began realize the economic, military, technological and geopolitical convergence of interests on various fronts (Singh, 2016). Following the conclusion of strategic partnership in 2000 India got assigned central place in Russia's South Asia policy (Mankoff, 2009). Although, faced with increased international competition, Russia tried its best to retain India as major buyer of military hardware in order to sustain and develop its military industrial complex. The annual trade that mainly consists of weapon trade between the two began to develop and amounted to 1.5 billion dollars. The two countries started commissioning many joint projects and renovations of Russian aircraft carrier, fighter jets, and helicopters bought by India. India forces got equipped with Russian weapons and India began manufacturing the Russian weapons under license. (Martin, 2004). Hence, relationship moved in a positive direction in all spheres after the Putin's coming to power followed by conclusion of the strategic partnership in 2000 to later upgradation to special and privileged one in 2010 (Hanumanthappa, 2014).

In the wake of US dominance in the region and the Indo-US strategic partnership, Russia besides the revamping of relations with India got induced to develop its relations with China and Pakistan. As for as the China is concerned, Russia since the beginning of 21st century particularly after the signing of treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 2001 began actively increasing its military, economic and diplomatic engagement with the country (Jingjie, 2013). The common enemy, the US and its Asia pivot become the primary reason for strengthening their strategic partnership (Malle, 2017). Russia also began to develop its relationship with Pakistan in order to reshape its foreign policy objectives towards South Asia. The ice was broken in bilateral relationship when the President Pervez Musharraf's visited Moscow in 2003 followed by Russian Premier Mikhail Medvedev's visit to Islamabad in 2007. Such diversified policy was provided strong push in 2010 Russia's foreign policy framework in which an important dimension of pivot to South Asia was emphasized. This shift in Russia's South Asian policy was reinforced as the reflection of Indo-US political and military partnership against its interests in the region. As per the pivot, the Russian cooperation with China as a strong nexus against the US hegemony is first to be reinforced. Later, Russia has to develop close ties with the Pakistan (Lukin, 2016). The approach towards China becomes more pragmatic particularly when Chinese premier Xi Jinping visited to Russia in 2013 and signed various agreements related to diverse areas of cooperation ranging from economic, political to strategic (Hill & Lo, 2013). Regarding Pakistan, the policy acted more vital when Russia described the Pakistan as not only the economic and trade partner but also the most important Russian partner in South Asia. These were provided strong momentum over the last several years to provide tough vies for power against the US. Russia is putting several stringent efforts to revamp the relations with China and Pakistan. It signed the strategic partnership with China in 2014, immediately after the annexation of Crimea which is widely regarded as the most enhanced in terms of

depth and breadth against all the previous strategic partnerships. From increasing trade potential, Russia provide hi-tech and advanced defense systems to China. As regards to Pakistan, Russia took concrete steps to cement their relations while making historical military agreement with Pakistan in 2014 (Saalman, 2017). It has increased the military exchanges¹ with Pakistan and showing keen interest in addressing the military requisites of Pakistan. Russia also began to assist Pakistan on economic, security and other related issues (Mahmood & Baloch, 2013). These important attempts show that Russia's South Asia policy undergo rigours shifts in deepening political, diplomatic, military, defense, economic, trade and security cooperation and dialogues with China and Pakistan. However, these policy conquests directed against the Indo-US strategic partnership, primarily, adds to China-Pakistan link which results in emergence of Russia-China-Pakistan strategic trio.

Emergence of new Strategic Axis in South Asia in the 21st century

Given of the changing geopolitical and geostrategic realities with great speed, Russia emerged with the new policy shifts in the wake greater aspiration for leadership in the neighborhood and beyond. In its current South Asian realignment, the Russia is intended to challenge the US hegemony by diversifying its relations. This is very well stated by the balance of power theory as 'the state's ally rather than to act alone in order to balance against the threats posed by opponent powers'. The shift result resulted into a strategic dimension as apparent as Russia-Pakistan-China axis whereby the matrix of previously robust Sino-Pak all-weather friendship severed as the base. This strategic triangle has created a strong complex balanced equation against the Indo-US strategic engagement since it clubbed the three important nuclear weapon states.

Since Russian resurgence, the Moscow has been actively increasing its military, economic and diplomatic relations with China and Pakistan. The trend towards China continued from Cold War and have gone in for further strategic partnerships marked in 1994 and 1996. At the advent of 21st century it strongly strengthened the partnership by signing the treaty of friendship and cooperation in 2001 (Jingjie, 2013). There is no doubt that the Russia and China had not always been fond of each other's but the condition of enemy's (US) enemy that is my friend made them long time strategic partners. Years afresh since the beginning of 21st century both Russia and China snub their disputes to make a new rapprochement (Malle, 2017). As the US used the Asia Pivot, the two powers in order to dismember the US influence in Asia strengthened their strategic partnership which emerged monumental when Chinese premier Xi Jinping visited to Russia in 2013 (Anishchuk & Heritage, 2013). Later on more in-depth partnership than of 1994, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2012, 2013 etc. was signed in 2014. The colossal agreements were made for supplying of S-400 surface-to-air missiles, 30-year gas contract worth \$400 billion, joint naval exercises and deployment of advanced Su-35 fighters to Beijing (Charles, 2016). In fact, in the field of defense, energy, trade and investment, in-depth cooperation has been reached out. High-level political visits have been made to assure mutual support on core interests of respective countries. The alarming call to world got palpable when Russia clearly supported China's stand on the disputed South China Sea against the international tribunal's verdict (12 July, 2016) and China supported and justified the Russia's military actions in war torn Syria (Thayer, 2016; Strokan & Yusin, 2016). Both the countries have reiterated their close cooperation on policy matters with national and internal dimension at various fora summits like Hangzhou G20 Summit 2016, Bishkek SCO summit 2016 and Peru APEC 2016 and 2017. Both have also provides official support to each other on defense and geostrategic concerns, the most prominent of this is the recent opposition to the US Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea. In response, both the countries have also been accelerating the joint naval exercises ("China, Russia naval drill in South China Sea to begin Monday", 2016).

As for as Pakistan is concerned, irrespective of thaws of cold war relations, the 21st century saw Moscow's benign engagement with Pakistan. The bilateral exchanges with breaking of ice from the visit of Parvaiz Musharraf to Moscow in 2003 enhanced the bilateral strategic cooperation. This engagement has undergone a definitive shape when in 2014 Russia makes military agreement with Pakistan and lift the arms embargo (The Dawn, 2014). Russia agreed to sell weapons and Pakistan purchased four Mi-35 helicopter gunships from Moscow through a landmark defence agreement signed on 19 August, 2015. Pakistan is also reported to import the Klimov RD-93 engines directly from Russia for its jf-17 multirole fighters. (Russia completed the delivery of four Mi-35M combat helicopters to Pakistan - News - Russian Aviation - Ruaviation.Com", 2017; Khan, 2015). Later on, further agreements relative to defense and military

¹The Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, visited Russia thrice in the past four years i.e. 2009, 2012 and 2013. Russia Army chiefs visited twice, Colonel General Alexander Postnikov, Commander-in-Chief Russian Ground Forces in May 2011 and Russian Army Chief Vladimir Chirkin in August 2013.

cooperation were concluded. Both the countries also carry out joint military drills called Druzhba in 2016 notwithstanding the Indian requests of postponement of these exercises in the wake of Uri attack. Plans have been made for holding larger number of joint exercises and drills in years to come (Topychkanov, 2017). Besides, military and defense relationship Since 2015, Russia also began to work for infrastructure development of Pakistan like US\$ 2 billion North-South 1,100-km gas pipeline agreement with Pakistan in 2015 that would run from Karachi to Lahore (Topychkanov, 2017). Reports have also come out that Pakistan has approved the path for Russia to become a part of China dominated Gwadar Port ("Pakistan Approves Russia's Request to Use Gwadar Port: Chinese Media", 2017). Russia has also showed aspirations for merging its Eurasian Economic Union with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Parashar, 2016). Besides this Russia in its policy towards Afghanistan in entente with China tried to engage Pakistan in countering the ISIS which India dislikes. It precluded India and Afghanistan from the trilateral meet of Russia, China and Pakistan in December 2016 to discuss developments in Afghanistan (Kamran, 2017). It was only after annoyance and objection from India and Afghanistan, the two were included in the February 2017 talks. This first ever such greater engagement clearly indicates how the Russia is enthusiastic in strengthening its strategic partnership with Pakistan. However, the reflection of Russia-Pak close proximity is challenging imperative for India.

The important leg that acts a lynchpin for the construction of the Russia-China-Pakistan triangle is the China-Pakistan link. Relative to this link, the strategic partnership has been in existence since Cold War period. China has had been strengthening the military, diplomatic and economic relations with Pakistan and actively working in building its nuclear reactors. Militarily Pakistan has emerged as the largest importer of Chinese manufactured defense equipment. It is now involved in co-production and co-development of JF-17 fighter jets and scheduled to buy almost eight Chinese's S20 or Yuan-class diesel-electric submarines (SSK) (Chandrashekhar, 2016). Besides military development, China has always supported Pakistan on various issues and events at different fora's and repeatedly assured help in case of any foreign aggression. In recent years, China is providing all out support to Pakistan by blocking the India's entry into nuclear supplier group and abstain from designating Jaish-e-Mohammad Chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist ("China To Block India Again On Both Nuclear Group And Jaish Terror Chief", 2017). China has also significantly invested in Pakistan's Gwadar Port and in the Karakoram corridor (Mitra, 2015). With the launching of massive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the texture and context of economic relationship has strengthened its contours. Pakistan is also ensuring China's security in the Uyghur region, provide China's access to Europe and Middle East and more importantly served China's Anti-Indian policy. In fact, the two are strongly hell-bent on consorting with each other.

The aforementioned mutual overtures between Russia, China and Pakistan are a part of greater shift in international relations. It all becomes credible when Russia shifted its policy towards China and Pakistan. Given the convergence of interests, the strategic trio despite fighting terrorism, emerged as an import force for Russia and China to dethrone the US hegemonic position and for Pakistan the carrot to ensure its security and inducement to its India-centric policy under the wing of Russia and China. In the near future, the triangle would become organized as their abilities complement each other. Russia has the ability to become the alternate source of western technology and defense development, China is economically more robust and has the potential to invest and consume energy supplies and Pakistan while requiring economic development would encourage the investment, energy supplies and defense paraphernalia. So, within the trio all the three will be benefited. No doubt, there is possibility that Russia has the ability to manage its defense relations with all the three China, Pakistan and India. However, there is palpable hypothesizing that while arming Pakistan, Russia would not certainly entertain and provide privileged treatment to its old friend India. At the same time the strategic partner of India, the US under the Trump administration made India the epicenter of its South Asia policy and called the Pakistan as deceitful. Under these circumstances, Russia China and Pakistan capitalize on, in order to strengthen and write the rules of emerging trio. However, this would create concerns for India.

Concerns for India

Since India and the US emerged as close partners in South Asia, the coming in orchestra of Russia, China and Pakistan gave a new offhand to the geo-political panorama. The strategic trio has caught the attention of various analysts and policy makers because of its possible far reaching consequences. Having an approximate combination of 7620 strong nuclear war heads, the trio would emerge as a nerve-racking force in the region challengeable to India and its strategic partnership with the US ("China, Russia and Pakistan: New Superpower Triangle", 2016). Some argue that Russia, China and

Pakistan axis does not have serious implications for India but it is also the thing that adds to Pakistan's strategic strength. Moreover, when Russia, the India's time tested friend, seek the common cause with India's regional adversaries, the India's core interests would be threatened.

Within the designed framework of Russia-China-Pakistan axis, the recent development of Russian military cooperation with its Cold War rival Pakistan is posing serious concerns for India. It adds to Pakistan's Indo-Centric policy (Topychkanov, 2017). No doubt, India has conveyed to Russia about the concerns emerged out of its military collaboration with Pakistan. However, Russia discarded the allegations in positive way of not to be covetous about the emerging Russia-Pakistan intimacy. Although, Russian foreign ministry announced that only the small weapons and those deal with countering terrorism would be supplied, yet the supplying of Mi-35 helicopters have been approved and there are reports of further defense imports (Russia completed the delivery of four Mi-35M combat helicopters to Pakistan - News - Russian Aviation - Ruaviation.Com", 2017; Khan, 2015). Moreover, since China is already pro-actively building weapon program in Pakistan and helping in the development of nuclear reactors, the Russia's relations with Pakistan will certainly strengthen the Pakistan's defense capabilities in a stronger way inimical to Indian interests. Hence, the perception of adding to Pakistan's Indo-Centric Policy cannot be ruled out. It is also highly alarming when Indian sensitiveness have not been given due consideration in spite of the requests made by India in wake of Uri attacks to hold in limbo the joint drills with Pakistan.

India's sovereignty has been undermined when Russia agreed to become member of CPEC as it passes through the Pakistan occupied Kashmir, a territory that that is part of Indian side of Kashmir ("Russia's joining of CPEC to enhance China, Russia and Pakistan cooperation", 2017). Since, Russia also aspired of merging the Eurasian Economic Union, the Putin's pet project with the CPEC; the India's Eurasian strategy also come under the great challenge. The association of India with the Eurasian Economic Union for which work was processed for more than a year would be hit badly (Sachdeva, 2016). Moreover, if materialize it would engage Russia with Pakistan and China diplomatically, economically and strategically and wean away Russia from India. Furthermore, the triangle further strengthened by Pakistan's membership in SCO would lead Russia's and China's entry into warm waters of Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Besides this, the Russia's aspirations for building the energy and transportation corridors from Central Asia to Pakistan would increase the Pakistan's accessibility to Central Asia, thereby infringing elements that would create accessibility concerns for India to Central Asia (Hill, 2002). Moreover, if the geostrategic Central Asian region aligns with the said axis, the trio will expand into a strong powerful block.

The Russia's entry into the China-Pakistan matrix would also give diplomatic and political support to Pakistan and China against India on border issues, regional power politics, cross border terrorism, rising Islamic fundamentalism, Afghanistan conundrum and others. Regarding, the terrorism, it becomes evident when Russia and China reject the India's bid to project Pakistan as the terrorist state (Swami, 2016). The allegations against the Pakistan of providing sanctuaries to terrorists have been declared baseless by Russian special envoy on Afghanistan at the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Meeting in Amritsar on 4th Dec, 2016 (Sajjanhar, 2016). India's interests have been undermined given the Russia's flexible approach to lift the sanctions against the select Taliban leaders and vetoing the designation of Jaish-e-Mohammad Chief Masood Azhar as a terrorist ("In blow to India, Russia joins China and Pakistan in asking UNSC to lift sanctions against Taliban leaders", 2017). This prop up to Pakistan adds to its geopolitical clout against the India and continues to give sleepless nights to Indian policymakers who have sought to isolate Islamabad on the issue of terrorism.

As for as the Afghanistan is concerned the Russia and China give importance to Pakistan and bring it to the Centre stage and important role player in the Afghanistan. Recently, it comes as a great shock to India when India has not been invited to Russia, China and Pakistan talks held December last year (Paliwal, 2017). Pakistan's engagement as the key role player would encourage anti-India and pro-Pakistan attitude in Afghanistan. And if Russia's and China's work with Pakistan get firmly established to deal and engage with terrorism and Taliban, India might find itself isolated in its policy towards terrorism and Afghanistan and its interests in Afghanistan would be threatened.

Thus, Russia's and China's strengthening of contours and context of relationship with Pakistan from CPEC to terrorism and Afghanistan policy would create potential challenges for Indian establishment. India would be isolated from the regional mainstream and would lose the Russian diplomatic support in mediation on Indo-Pak ties at domestic and international issues and events which further wean away the two countries. In fact, it will lose its association with its time tested friend, Russia. The Indian foreign policy is also making mistakes of not addressing well the Russian compliance to cooperate. Actually, the Indian establishment is facing a quandary situation with whom to align since India do not want to lose its

time tested friend Russia, its enhanced relationship with China and more particularly the strategic relations with the US.

Considering India's Strategy

The strategic axis between Russia-China-Pakistan greatly undermines the Indian interests. Since the trio began to set, the Modi government which comes to power in 2014 also took the important steps with regard to its interests in the region. The Prime Minister on the occasion of swearing in ceremony extended an invitation to heads of the government of all SAARC countries and later visited these countries to strengthen the regional mechanism. With respect to Himalayan neighbours Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh he emphasized the idea of trans-Himalayan regionalism as key stone for the regional security (Muni, 2017). During his visit to Bangladesh he becomes successful in settlement of the 41-year-old boundary dispute and initiation of access to Chittagong port. While traveling to Sri Lanka Modi became the first Prime Minister in 28 years after Rajiv Gandhi to take a tour to the nation. Recently, he visited Myanmar to lead in, which happened to be developing military and strategic ties with Pakistan since 2011. He also reached out to Afghanistan by declaring to contribute and not compete and to rebuild not to destroy or create conflict (Das, 2016). These overturns towards the immediate neighbourhood delineates the policy of how Prime Minister Modi reached out to its neighbours. Prime Minister Modi also tried efforts to rebuild the relationship with Pakistan by taking the significant efforts like inviting his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif to his oath taking ceremony followed by visit to Pakistan in 2015. However, the Modi's evocative and ambitious rhetoric of engaging with Pakistan to turn the course of history lasted for a short span of time as Pakistan continuously remain engaged in seize fire violations and cross border terrorism.

Modi government took several steps to tear down the challenges posed by the strategic trio. It reached out to external major powers involved in the South Asian region through diplomatic, political and strategic means against the Pakistan. In order to tear down the Pakistan's resistance and deterrence capabilities, it efficiently pursued in tandem with the west through heavy and advanced deployments and holding of frequent exercises particularly the recent Malabar exercise which was a great threat to the triple axis (Mohanty, 2017). The Pakistan along with its strategic partner China has also come under greater threat since India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US (Jain, 2016). At both the regional and international level it tried its best to isolate Pakistan as the sponsor and heaven of terrorism like in Goa BRICS summit in 2016 and recently in 72 session of the United Nations general assembly (The Indian Express, 2017). The Prime Minister Narendra Modi also started working towards strengthening its relations with Russia and China and made agreements worth of billions of dollars. Thus, these important efforts are taken by the present government but still these efforts have not yield much results. And India is remaining less successful to bring Pakistan to heel in the context of emerging great power context in Asia. This is primarily because Russia and China are recurrently intensifying military and economic cooperation with Pakistan in which often many overturns are inimical to India.

Therefore, India should factor the trio developments like the evolving Russia-China, China-Pakistan and now Russia-Pakistan contacts in its policy formulation. The question which often strikes is why in spite of India's closeness with Russia on Ukraine and Syria and large strategic and defense agreements, it is developing strong partnership with China making strong inroads into Pakistan without giving due regard to Indian concerns. The chief reason for this is the India's cozying up to the West and the US, regarded by Russia as the India's strategic promiscuity. Hence, India needs to take the lead in preserving its ties with its time-tested and reliable partner Russia by removing skepticism, uncertainty in its relationship with Russia. Only this would prevent the emerging trio to skew the balance of power against the India.

Conclusion

Russia's South Asian policy has changed in the context of new shifts taking place in the regional and international system. Primarily with the changing US South Asian strategy the rules of the game undergo greater transformation. India began to develop the relationship with the US which Russia initially observed patiently. However, as the Indo-US burgeoning relationship continues to strengthen, the Russia was hit seriously. Russia began to draw its closer attention towards China and Pakistan. Essentially, in fit of pique, Russia strongly entered the matrix of intensified Sino-Pak axis in the post 2014 phase. The Indo-US strategic

balance started to be challenged apparently when Russia strongly made rapprochement with China and develop military relations with Pakistan and comes in consort to support Pakistan on various fora, issues, and events and showed aspirations to team up with their joint mega projects like CPEC. This results in the emergence of Russia, China and Pakistan axis that pose strong concerns for the India and its strategic partnership with the US. Without giving due regard to India's growing concerns, Russia continues to grow and expand its relationship with India's big rivals, China and Pakistan. However, if the Russia's entry into China-Pakistan matrix materializes, the India would be placed in unfavorable position and ultimately hit its relations with its time tested friend, Russia. There are avenues of cooperation between India and Russia that still did not undergo death knell. However, India has to make proactive diplomatic efforts to materialize the benefit of avenues available and has to reach out to the Russia to voice its concerns effectively arising out of the recent Russia-China-Pakistan developments. Moreover, the India has to make the prudent strategy in managing the relations with the major powers involved in the South Asian Region. Otherwise the imperative would place India in great problem which has been added fuel by Trump's South Asia policy under which the Indian establishment supposed to engage in a manner that would cost its relations with Russia. Moreover, extra bonhomie with the US could generate two more enemies for the country. So, India has to quickly learn to adapt to rapidly changing geo-political and geostrategic realities.

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