

How to Cite:

Chaliha, F. (2022). Russia's interest in Pakistan and its implications on India. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S1), 501-509.

<https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS1.4794>

Russia's Interest in Pakistan and Its Implications on India

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Abstract---The main objective of this paper is to examine the five prime reasons under which Russia had shifted its interest towards deepening their strategic relations with Pakistan keeping at stake its historic relations with India. Historically, both Soviet Union and Pakistan looked at each other either through the prism of U.S or India leaving little scope for independent foreign-policy making towards each other or even extending strategic manoeuvring. Currently, the orbit of their relations is undergoing rapid changes in the backdrop of the New Cold War. As such, besides, covering the historical background, the present study is therefore an attempt to analyse the growing geo-strategic interest of Russia in Pakistan and examine whether this reapproachment have any impact on Indo-Russian relations. In the process it also examines how their strategic synergy may alter the existing balance of power in South Asia and international peace.

Keywords---CPEC, gas pipeline, Russia-Pakistan, strategic alliance, U.S-India.

Introduction

The renaissance of Russia-Pakistan geo-strategic relationship validates a state's aspirations to uphold its national interest amidst diplomatic multilateralism. Both, Russia and Pakistan have their individual strategic goals which they want to fulfil in order to consolidate their influence in the South Asian region. To quote Yuri Federov, "Russia wants to see itself as, an influential centre of multi-polar world; hence Pakistan is a part of Russian broader strategy for Central Asian countries". Historically, Moscow's interest in Pakistan were centered primarily on academic lines, the first Soviet work on Pakistan appeared in 1943, before the State was actually created. However, under the administration of President Vladimir Putin the Russia-Pakistan diplomatic interest had undergone a significant leap. Thus, with the change in global political order and transnational

International Journal of Health Sciences ISSN 2550-6978 E-ISSN 2550-696X © 2022.

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Manuscript submitted: 27 Nov 2021, Manuscript revised: 18 Feb 2022, Accepted for publication: 09 March 2022

challenges, both the countries view each other as lucrative option to strengthen their defence and security sectors, economic and trade relations as well as a gateway to their future Look West Policy. However, how far this Russia-Pakistan alignment would impact the historical friendly relations of India and Pakistan still needs to be discussed. Therefore, in this article an attempt would be made to analyse the growing geo-strategic interest of Russia in Pakistan and examine whether this reapproachment have any impact on Indo-Russian relations (Khan, 2017; Khan, 2011; Moskalenko & Topychkanov 2014; Popatia, 1988).

Historical background of russia-pakistan relations

Pakistan as a nascent state during the Cold War period worked towards economic growth and infrastructural development of the State. Towards this end, it also approached U.S for financial and military aid keeping in perspective the then Indo-Pakistan relations. During these diplomatic exchanges, even Russia offered a hand of friendship for the first time in May 1948, but then Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan instead choosed to visit U.S on 3rd May 1950. The hopes for further Russia-Pakistan ties dropped completely when Pakistan decided to join the U.S backed South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). This made Russia to take an Indo-Centric approach in regard to extending its military and diplomatic relations. India also reciprocated positively since its socialist underpinnings drove it towards the Soviet Union. Further, the China-Pakistan nexus (after the Sino-Soviet split) and the defacto Russia-India alliance during India's liberation of Bangladesh in the 1970s added towards creating further gap between Russia-Pakistan relations. However, in between the 70s, it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who tried to reinforce Pakistan-Russia ties for the first time while concluding a 'Fuel and Power Agreement,' in 1960. The USSR provided 120 million roubles for a period of 12 years (Ahmad, 2012). Unfortunately, after the death of Bhutto, the Pakistan-Russia relations once again detoriated under the leadership of the then military General Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan. Following which during the 1970s Gen. Zia agreed to become a conduit to U.S against the Soviet-Invasion of Afghanistan. He also provided military support and training to the *Mujahideen*/Taliban forces fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan (Ahmadani, 2020). This provided a complete rupture of growth of Pakistan-Russia relations almost for a decade (1979-89). Towards the end of the Cold War, in the 1990s the Russia-Pakistan relations continued to get further strained owing to Pakistan's support of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Russia and India siding with the Northern Alliances. In addition, Russia's support of India's position in Kashmir and counter vetoing each and every move of Pakistan against India in the UN Security Council convinced Pakistan that there was little to gain from Russia.

However, at the advent of the new millennium there were also changes in the geopolitical scenario of the world economy which added towards blurring of the bitterness between the two countries. In this regard, the re-defining of national interests and foreign policy initiatives were the motivating factors. Besides this, after the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan post-Soviet invasion, the economic and military aid supplies also demurred. Alternatively, Pakistan looked for military and economic aid from China, Russia and other middle-east countries. Eventually, the Abbottabad incident created further rift in the U.S-Pakistan

relations. Thereby, the shift in geo-strategic interest of the big players like U.S from Pakistan to India, gradually shifted the significance of Indo-Russian relations which further driven Russia to engage with other countries of the region. In this case, Pakistan although was not a large regional player like India but its 'natural resource' base and geo-strategic position made it an important link for strategic expansion of Russia (Purushothaman, 2015; Rekha & Patney, 2017; Nye Jr, 1992).

In context to the above, in the year 1999 Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Moscow. It was the first visit to Russia by a Pakistani head of State. Similarly in the year 2003 even President Pervez Musharraf also paid a visit and extended the hand of amity to Russia. Reciprocally, in the year 2007 Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov also paid a visit to Pakistan which was the first visit of an Russian high official to Pakistan. In the same manner, even on 2011 onwards to till date, there had been regular consecutive high level official visits from both the countries engaging in areas of energy, regional connectivity, infrastructure and trade and several Memorandums of Understandings (MOUs) were also concluded on these sectors of the economy. Thus, the above mentioned official travel exchanges and the increasing trend of proximity between Russia and Pakistan on various sectors are not just because of strategic closeness of U.S and India but there are more towards Russia's growing interest in Pakistan and vice-versa keeping in perspective the changing global dynamics.

Russia's growing interest in Pakistan

Geo-strategic significance of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

CPEC which was visualised by Chinese premier Li Keqiang during his visit to Pakistan on May 2013 was given a real shape after its due approval from Chinese President Xi Jinping. The CPEC would connect the north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang with the Pakistani port of Gwadar through a network of roads measuring around 3000 kms (1,800 miles), providing Pakistan its much needed economic infrastructure, specially power generation plants (Amin, 2016). The CPEC is also a flagship project of the 'Belt and Road Initiative,' (BRI) due to its location at the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. Unlike India, Russia had rendered strong support to China's CPEC Project. To quote Russia's Ambassador to Pakistan Alexey Y. Dedov, "Russia and Pakistan have held discussions to merge Moscow's Eurasian Economic Project with the CPEC" (Baev, 2015). Russia already being a strategic-partner to China under various forums like G20, BRICS, SCO, RIC and OBOR looks at Pakistan as a promising stakeholder towards expanding the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) to the SAARC nations of the South Asian region when it comes to building up connectivity with CPEC. Along with Russia even the Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia could have access to a new market of over 200-300 million potential customers for selling their furnished products, with greater returns in exchange and at the same time enable them to maintain an economic balance between Russia and China. Building on this idea, CPEC would also act as a catalyst in boosting economic and geo-strategic cooperation between Russia and China, particularly in collaborating with joint projects in CPEC en route to the Indian Ocean and thereby building a Russia-Pakistan-China trade triangle.

North-South Gas Pipeline (NSGP) project

Owing to on and off U.S sanctions on Russian companies, Russia now turned towards east to the South Asian region and China at large, for enhancing their ties in areas related to energy and economic trade relations. Meantime, Pakistan's existing energy infrastructure lacked in capacity in regard to transportation of large volume of gas supplies from Southern to Northern regions of Pakistan. In this regard, the Regasified Liquefied Natural Gas (RLNG) Pipeline had been one such energy project which both Pakistan and Russia have been working on since 2015. Companies setting up new RLNG terminals require the creation of pipeline capacity for gas transmission from Karachi to Lahore and in the absence of such a capacity; they are in an uncertain situation (Budhwar, 2007). Ultimately, both Russia and Pakistan had signed an energy deal agreement on 16th October 2015, worth U.S \$ 1.7 billion which would be laid between a stretch of 1,100 kms between Karachi and Lahore, having a transmission capacity of 1.2 billion cubic feet per day (bcfd) with a long-term plan to increase it to 1.6 bcfd (Chaudhari, 1966).

After the Supreme Court decision on 13th August, 2020 in regard to implementation of the project in practice, the Gas Infrastructure Development Cess (GIDC) directed the federal government to take all steps to commence the laying of North-South Gas Pipeline. It was also decided that the funds collected on account of GIDC would be utilised to execute the Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project in the near future. Thus, the LNG pipeline project would not only benefit Pakistan but it would give a further boost to Russia-Pakistan strategic partnership in various other sectors of the economy. For example, Russia had already provided an investment package of \$ 14 billion to Pakistan in the energy sector which includes building a underground storage project and another offshore gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan through the Gwadar Port, which in an indirect way would also help Russia to connect itself with the West Asian countries. Moreover, Russia would also export 500 cubic feet per day (mmcf) to billion cubic feet per day gas to meet the growing demands of gas following industrialization under the CPEC, thereby striving to establish its foothold in the Pakistani market (Shah, 2015; Thorun, 2008; Tikhonova, 2017).

The Afghan Conundrum and joint military exercises

Russia views Pakistan as an important player in bringing about stability in Afghanistan which have a direct impact on Russian security and sustainable development and larger Central Asian solidarity. However, the hostilities that persist within the three South Asian states (India, Pakistan and Afghanistan) complicates any initiatives undertaken to maintain peace and growth of the region. In addition, the presence of the non-state actors within the Afgh-Pak region raises apprehensions about a domino effect to the existential threats within this region. The unstable situation in Afghanistan also indirectly influences the security environment within Central Asian states. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) are considered to be the most lethal militant organizations currently based in northern Afghanistan which is a source of distress for Russia (Denisov & Popadyuk, 2016). As such there are concerns about citizens of Russia or other countries of the Commonwealth of

Independent States (CIS) joining such terrorist organizations with Pakistani ties and receive instructions in training camps or religious schools, '*madrassas*' on both Afghanistan and Pakistani territory. For example, In March 2013, when the Pakistani Taliban took over most of the Tirah Valley in North Waziristan, upto 3000 foreigners, predominantly Chechens and Uzbeks, fought for the Talibs (Durke, 1959). Thus, both terrorist camps and *madrassas* had given rise to a network of contacts between Russian and Pakistani extremists. Moreover, Russia in addition to having endured to terrorist attacks itself also functions as a transit point for terrorists migrating from South Asia to Western Europe along with turning into a major network link of illegal migration and smuggling. Thereby, smuggling or drug trafficking for example could provide terrorist with new options for mobility and acquiring additional resources for organized crimes.

Keeping in view the above factors Russia is left with no other option but to except towards working for the stabilization in Afghanistan and without the help of Pakistan it would be tricky and impossible. Moreover, with China endorsing a Pakistani role in deciding Afghanistan's future, Russia sees little scope for opposing Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. Further, with the drawdown of the U.S troops from Afghanistan beginning in December 2014 Russia hopes to create strategic space for itself in the Indo-Pacific region. Drawing from the above interest of Russia in Pakistan both the States had also undertaken joint military exercises to combat terror activities in the region. Towards this end, "Russian Ambassador to Pakistan Alexy Y. Dedov also stated that Russia is keen to assist Pakistan in fighting terrorism by suppling military equipment" (Fedorov, 2008). The first Russia-Pakistan Counter-narcotics Exercise was held in October 2014 followed by a second exercise in December 2015. The first ever joint military exercise, Druzhbha (a Russian word meaning "friendship"), was conducted between the two armies from September 24-October 10, 2016 in the Pakistani province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Though, India and Russia exercises progressive ties with each other yet Russia had disregarded India's opposition towards joint military exercises after the Uri Attacks. The 2017 military drills would also mark a significant change in relations between both states, as the drills aimed to improve combat readiness against terrorism and bolster mountain training.

The third joint military exercise Druzhbha III, were held in 2018 in Cherat, KPK and at the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) in Pabbi, KPK, to boost counter-terrorism cooperation to tackle the growing threat of Islamic State (IS) from Afghanistan. In August 2018, Moscow and Islamabad also held the first meeting of Russia-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) and signed a defence agreement for an unprecedented contract with Islamabad which opens the doors for the very first time for Russian military training of Pakistan army officers. The JMCC is the highest forum of defence collaboration between both the partner States. Russia also participated in the Aman-17 international naval exercise hosted by Pakistan in February 2017. Pakistan Navy has been biennially hosted the multi-national maritime exercise since 2007 and now 6th exercise of AMAN series is scheduled in the first quarter of 2019. Currently, in the year 2020 Russia had invited Pakistan, China and Iran for its massive military drills in the Caucasus on 21st and 22nd September, 2020 with troops from several countries which includes naval and land exercises. Thus, keeping in perspective

the joint-military drills and exercises along with Pakistan coming next in line with India as an importer of Russian defence equipment, yet in reality it neither could come at par with Indian market nor does it have enough finances to purchase defence equipments (Tiwari, 2016; Unnikrishnan, 2017; White, 2011).

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform to expand strategic ties

Since 15th June 2001 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) had played an important role towards security, geopolitical interest, economic connectivity and exchanges, of its member states at regional level. With the entry of India and Pakistan in 2017 as a member State of SCO, prospects for future sustainability and growth of these regions also gets intertwined towards greater strategic partnership. Pakistan as member of SCO had once again provided the traid (Russia-Pakistan-China) another platform to streamline their trade and economic relations and cooperate in combating terrorism. The SCO had also provided most of the contending players China-India-Pakistan a platform where the trio could set aside their hostilities and differences through multilateral dialogue processes which would work for the mutual interest of not just them but towards maintaining a balance distribution of resources and tackling the transnational threats at the regional level involving Russia and the Central Asian member States. In addition, it would also provide Russia to use its relations with Pakistan to improve its position in the SCO. Further, the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, a permanent body of the SCO designed to enhance collaboration in fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism would prove helpful for Russia and Pakistan towards combating terrorism and extremism through a collaborative regional approach with other member States. For example, regardless of stressed relations between India and Pakistan, the Indian legal expert's delegation attended a three-day meeting of Legal Experts Group of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure hosted by Pakistan in May 2018 (Hilali, 2012).

Implications on Indo-Russian relations

India-Russia relations are build-upon a mutual trust and cooperation which goes back in history even before India achieved independence. From cultural exchanges to industrial infrastructure building to sharing common goals of regional and global peace and security both the states strategic partnership had withstood the test of time. During the year 2017 India and Russia together celebrated their 70th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations. In the same year they also held the 18th Annual Bilateral Summit, which saw the adoption of the historic St. Petersburg Declaration: Vision for the 21st Century. Along with strategic partnership both the States also shared strong defence ties. Overtime the defence relationship had evolved from buyer-seller to that of joint production and development with emphasis on technology sharing. In this regard, Russia had been a very committed partner in the, 'Make in India' programme. Likewise the two countries had also agreed renew their cultural exchanges programme for the period 2017-19 and declared 2018 to be celebrated as 'Year of Tourism' between India and Russia. Even in the international arena both the countries had showed solidarity of interest and coordinated their actions. For

example, Russia's timely support to India in regard to SCO and NSG membership. Therefore, one could say that for decades so far both India and Russia have identified several areas of cooperation based on innovation, robotics, artificial intelligence, aviation outer space cooperation etc.

However, despite of sharing such close bilateral ties in recent years their relationship had faced increasing stress because of the new strategic world order characterised by the rise of China and its growing influence on the broader regional and global order. In this sense, China's strategic state policy in regard to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) followed by CPEC in Pakistan had expanded Russia's interest in connecting Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to the BRI and CPEC thereby giving way to a renewed strategic partnership owing to commonality of interest in economic and strategic fields between the trio-Russia-Pakistan-China. Moreover, the two-decade old 'India-Russia Annual Summit' was cancelled for the first time last year, although both the States denied all the speculations on the grounds of epidemiological reasons yet one cannot overlook the fact that India had taken part in a large number of other bilateral and multilateral talks virtually, even if the pandemic had prevented physical meetings. Correspondingly, even Russian officials showed reservations leading to postponement of the summit, over India joining the Indo-Pacific initiative and Quad, arguing that it is meant to contain China. To quote Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during Russian International Affairs Council, at Moscow on December 8, 2020, "India is currently an object of the Western countries persistent, aggressive and devious policy as they are trying to engage it in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies the west is attempting to undermine our closer partnership and privileged relations with India" (Hussain, 2012). Building on this, according to data from SIPRI during the period 2015-19 Russia's share of India's defence market fell from 72 per cent to 56 per cent, as supplies diversified (Kaplan, 1994). In addition, the rising border tensions towards spread of Islamic extremism from Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics had also become another major cause of drawing Russia closer to Pakistan. Nevertheless, at a positive note Pak-Russia relations might also play the role of a mediator in persuading Pakistan not to act against India and instead play a constructive role in Afghanistan, which again would turn into India's interest.

Conclusion

Pak-Russia relations have been evolving in the positive direction during recent months. There is vast potential for the growth of bilateral cooperation between the two countries in a wide range of areas. Since the two sides have shown a keen desire to explore new areas and strengthen already existing cooperation in multiple fields, the coming years are certain to witness an expansion of cooperation between the two States. The areas of energy, regional connectivity, infrastructure and trade are going to be the focus of these endeavours. Moreover, CPEC and related on-going infrastructural projects at Gilgit-Baltistan is looked upon as an added advantage for Russian foreign policy goals and therefore they are much supportive of it. At this point, a chance of a trilateral relationship between Pakistan-China and Russia seems to be emerging in the near future. However, this newly emerging friendship between the two States is likely to be

closely watched by India and U.S. in view of larger geo-strategic realities and challenges.

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