



The Russia–Pakistan Equation

CommandEleven
Commentary
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ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

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Founded in 2015, CommandEleven provides situational awareness to facilitate a better understanding of the key dynamics that effect Pakistan from a national security perspective, especially in relation to terrorism, insurgencies and extremism.

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A remarkable geopolitical shift has taken place in this part of the world as the traditional pattern of friends and adversaries is broken. India and Pakistan have been in opposite camps since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. India and Russia have been all-time strategic partners while Pakistan was more mindful of American interests and was a Cold War ally of the United States. China and Pakistan had an all-weather friendship since 1950 but it is only recently that this partnership made major ripples such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project. The current emerging bloc of China, Pakistan and Russia has taken the world by surprise, some recent developments in 2016 caused this realignment.

The first factor has been a huge improvement in U.S-India relations, a bilateral deal on military logistics exchange was formalized this year, this Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement allowed both countries to access each other's land, air and naval bases. The United States designated India as its Major Defence Partner, Washington has virtually legitimized it as the world's sixth nuclear weapon state.

The second factor was India's single-minded animosity towards Pakistan and its intention to prevent the CPEC project at any cost, this project is China's largest investment in any foreign country, ultimately any attack on CPEC will be taken as an act of war on China as well as Pakistan. The U.S. quietly supports India in this venture, it would love to contain China's rise so that it does not challenge its 'superpower' status, CPEC and the Chinese 'One Belt One Road' plan are a threat for America and its allies. Russia and China are more and more economically interdependent of late so it is inevitable that it would help protect Chinese interests.

The third major factor is the mess in Afghanistan, the U.S left a weak government in place which cannot assert its writ on most of the country, the country is at war with itself with the Taliban emerging as the undisputed power. The withdrawal of the U.S. forces helped mercenaries fill the vacuum and ISIS has become a real, growing threat since about a year, Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran feel ISIS is the real problem in Afghanistan but India wants to help the Ashraf Ghani government crush the Taliban instead. This issue is fast developing as a major divergence of interests as India treats it as inconsequential while the other countries want to nip ISIS in the bud before it spreads in their direction.

Consequently, it is not just economic interests which would bring China, Russia and Pakistan together, even their security concerns are similar. During 2016, Russia has been re-considering its priorities as India put one foot in the West, the logistics deal with the United States clinched matters. One of the first indications of Russia's change of heart was its participation in the first ever joint military exercises with Pakistan. The timing was particularly poignant as these exercises happened to coincide with the Uri terror attack and India was looking to wreak revenge on Pakistan for its supposed involvement. It had taken Russia's support for granted in raising the matter on international podiums and declaring Pakistan a pariah state. The BRICS summit in October brought another surprise, the Indians were astounded by the revelation that both Russia and China shielded Pakistan and blocked any unfavorable mention regarding Pakistan in the Goa declaration.

Today, Pakistan-Russia relations are not dependent on the Russia-India factor any more, a reliable and independent partnership governed by mutual interests has materialized, security and business interests are inter-merged and the future is promising. One more common factor for China, Russia and Pakistan is their current state of ties with the United States. After incurring heavy human losses in the endless War on Terror as a front-line state for US interests and still being asked to 'do more', Pakistan felt compelled to think of its national interests. India's current major defence partner status and its nuclear deal with the U.S. is not palatable for Pakistan. Russia is a traditional

adversary of the U.S. while China has its own problems with the U.S. and its allies in the South China Sea.

Shortly after this train of events, rumors circulated that the Russian Federal Security Services chief Alexander Bogdanov visited Gwadar port, it was reported by Pakistani media that Russia had joined CPEC and Russian ships would be allowed to use Gwadar port. Apparently, Russia is not willing to play second fiddle to the United States as far as India was concerned, notwithstanding all the Indo–Russian military deals in place. In December 2016, Russian envoy Alexey Y Dedov announced that his country would join the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and in future link its own [Eurasian Economic Union](#) project with [CPEC](#). Pakistan and Russia also held their first ever foreign office consultations on regional issues in Islamabad. A baffled India is trying to pretend nothing has happened even though the realities are changing fast. The CPEC is the initial factor which started this strategic shift, it promises to expand the political and economic influence of all the countries that become part of it.

The situation was best described by Russian presidential envoy to Pakistan Zamir Kabulov when he said "Moscow didn't complain about India's close cooperation with the US and so India also shouldn't complain about "much low level" of cooperation between Russia and Pakistan." There are reports in the Pakistani media that President Putin is likely to visit Pakistan in May 2017 to inaugurate an LNG pipeline project, such a visit is most welcome and would further increase the bonhomie and goodwill between both nations and enhance clarity in bilateral relations.

On 27th December, a trilateral meeting was held between Russia, China and Pakistan in Moscow to discuss a solution for Afghanistan, the Indian backed Afghan government was not invited to its dismay. Maria Zakharova, the foreign ministry spokesperson said, "[The three countries] expressed particular concern about the rising activity in the country of extremist groups including the Afghan branch of IS." She said the three countries agreed on a "flexible approach to remove certain figures from sanctions lists, as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement."

The looming ISIS threat has potential to bring the three nations even closer and joint military action could be possible in the future, the U.S. is gradually ceasing to be relevant in this regional scenario. China, Russia and Pakistan would ultimately want the U.S. to leave maintenance of security in Afghanistan to them, this would be a major setback to Indian ambitions in the region unless it falls in line with these imminent strategies. Iran also wants to counter the ISIS threat, so India would be virtually left to its own devices. The entire region would become consolidated with the exception of India in the long run.

These new geopolitical realities hit India in Afghanistan and affect its intentions regarding the CPEC as well, any future Indo–Pak war is impossible as any attack on CPEC would be seen as an attack on these regional powers. This new alliance is focused on changing the ground realities of Afghanistan, the countries involved have common focus, common targets and this is beginning to look like a long–term arrangement, there is nothing transitory about their future vision.

The new power troika of China, Russia and Pakistan carries great potential to herald in an era of peace in this region, it even diminishes the nuclear threat hanging like a Damocles' sword on citizens of the subcontinent.

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