



Five Forces Behind Pakistan's Pivot Towards Russia

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ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

CommandEleven is a research organization focused on Pakistan's national security aspects and enhancing global understanding and collaboration opportunities for the nation.

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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	4
GEOPOLITICAL REALIGNMENT	5
INDIA'S FACTOR	6
WARM WATERS	7
AFGHANISTAN QUESTION	8
COUNTER TERRORISM	9
FORECAST	10

PREFACE

'Nations are born in the hearts of poets but they prosper and die at the hands of politicians' said the most influential philosopher of Pakistan Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, as if to caution the young nation about the many challenges of statesmanship in an almost prophetic manner. A country is only as good as its statesmen, decision makers, thinkers, strategists, Generals, Spy masters and political leaders who are collectively known as the 'intelligentsia'. The decisions made by the 'intelligentsia' have far reaching consequences for a country's fate, especially if the state in question is an infant country with scarce resources, limited national power and is dearly wanted by its powerful neighbors due to its valuable geography. Pakistan was an example of such a country in the 1950s. It was a country surrounded by powerful neighbors like India, Iran, China and the Soviet Union, which they say could be seen from the Pakistani territory with a naked eye from across the Wakhan corridor.

The rule of the thumb says that while drafting your foreign policy you must start with your neighbors, but that's not what happened in Pakistan in the 1950s. The statesmen in the newly born country were presented with a stark choice by the dynamics of the Cold War as they either had to choose between their neighboring superpower, the USSR or the United States, a superpower across the oceans which had no cultural links to Pakistan. For better or worse the decision was made in the favor of Washington over Moscow and that became the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy. The coming decades would witness events defined by the SEATO, CENTO, the U-2 Saga, the East Pakistan civil war, the Soviet-Afghan war, demise of the Soviet Union, emergence of Russia, Pakistan's acquisition of a nuclear deterrence and the Western invasion of Afghanistan and the Middle East.

These events which unfolded over 5 decades slowly reversed the geopolitical dynamics which once held Moscow and Islamabad at an arm's length until the early 2000s when the 'intelligentsia' in Islamabad decided to start a formal rapprochement with Moscow. The process was slow in the beginning as the intelligentsia in both capitals not only had to come to a mutual understanding over the events and understandable distrust of the past 5 decades but also to find shared interests for the future. The engagement remained low key and moved at a snail's pace due to numerous conflicting interests both sides had which needed to be studied and rationalized in order to find room for cooperation. So here we are almost 17 years later, and the relationship which was cultivated in the early 2000s has started to materialize with tangible results. This evolving relationship between two important regional capitals can be traced down to five driving forces which are responsible for propelling the mutual relationship into the future. This article is meant to explore them one by one.

GEOPOLITICAL REALIGNMENT

During the past six decades, the relationship between Islamabad and Moscow was defined and redefined by changing geopolitical interests which resulted in low key ties between the two countries especially during the East Pakistan civil war in which the Soviet Union backed India and its Mukhti Bhini proxy forces against Pakistan's state authority and later during the Soviet Afghan war. That happened mainly because the two countries didn't share a formal ongoing dialogue between their decision makers and left their bilateral relationship at the mercy of external factors. After the emergence of Russia in the early 1990s, the global geopolitical landscape shifted from a somewhat balanced 'bipolar' world order into a world order designed to facilitate the hegemonic ambitions of the United States and her allies. Once the United States emerged as the only superpower, at numerous points in history it decided to capitalize on Pakistan's single-minded foreign policy by imposing sanctions which threatened the welfare of every Pakistani citizen and undermined Pakistan's core national security and economic interests.

The trend in Washington of '*using and abusing*' Pakistan hasn't ended because as of this week the US Govt has imposed a fresh set of sanctions on seven Pakistani companies which hold great importance for Pakistan's national security. It goes without saying that the bedrock of emerging Pakistan – Russia relationship is the mutual agreement and alignment of interests over the concept of 'multipolarity'.

This quest for multipolarity is the motive behind Pakistan's bid for the Chinese, Russian lead Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹ and its increased engagement with the Central Asian Republics and Iran on a number of different bi and multilateral avenues like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO),² Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas pipeline, Iran, Pakistan gas pipeline, CASA-1000, Quadrilateral Communication and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM)³ and Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC).⁴ This new strategy by Pakistan also serves to align its regional interests with Moscow's and helps diversify Islamabad's foreign, economic and strategic interests in the Central Asian region hence further depleting its toxic dependence on the United States for economic and diplomatic support.

Pakistan and Russia have common regional and bilateral interests stemming from the geopolitical realignment which is occurring in the wake of the US lead so called 'War on terrorism'. Pakistan believes that a multi-polar world order is critical for maintaining both regional and international peace and stability. The instability stemming from the US lead war in Afghanistan threatens national and regional security interests of China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian Republics, therefore Pakistan seeks greater cooperation with Beijing, Moscow and Tehran to bring about a regional solution to the war in

¹ "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Eleanor Albert, Council of Foreign Relations, Oct 14, 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>

² Economic Cooperation Organization, <http://www.ecosecretariat.org/in2.htm>

³ "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan issue joint statement on anti-terrorism, Ministry of National Defense, The People's Republic of China, Aug. 4, 2016.

http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/04/content_4707451.htm

⁴ Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation. <http://carecprogram.org/>

Afghanistan, because only by returning peace to Afghanistan the violence centered justification of the continued US lead occupation of Afghanistan can be ended.

Peace in Afghanistan is also necessary to contain or reverse the subversive influence of the United States which has been cultivated specifically to threaten and bully our region if needed through the planned 'permanent military bases' in Afghanistan therefore Islamabad's enthusiastic participation in the recently held tri-lateral dialogue between China, Russia and Pakistan hosted in Moscow to bring about a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan serves as a tangible example of the geopolitical symmetry which has evolved between Pakistan and Russia on critical geopolitical issues.

INDIA'S FACTOR

Indian deep state has been telling itself how good it really is at 'playing all sides' throughout the years of the Cold War and congratulating itself to date over what it chooses to believe as a 'dynamic' foreign policy. While on one hand India continued to have covert ties with Washington during the cold war, continued to receive American foreign aid to a degree that it became the single biggest recipient of the US aid money in the world, it pulled the 'nonaligned' card on the other hand and continued to assure the Soviet Union of their 'special relationship'. Through this policy, the Indian deep state kept the tabs of US aid and Soviet military equipment open at the same time. This was possible because the India was providing covert support to the US for its anti-China activities from its soil in return for the US aid and the United States chose to turn a 'Nelson's eye' towards India's 'special relationship' with the Soviet Union during a time when the Soviet-Chinese ties weren't always warm. Today though, the sands of time have shifted as a significant geopolitical alignment has occurred between Moscow and Beijing which has altered the regional geopolitical landscape. The Indian deep state has decided to part ways with the regional powers to join hands with the United States through agreements like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement or LMOA.⁵

The United States is all too eager to utilize India in order to contain the China-Russia axis which seeks a much-balanced multi-polar world order.

The Americans can pat themselves on the back for succeeding to make India believe that it has 'emerged' and therefore it can openly confront Beijing and Moscow in order to achieve its delusional objectives of hegemony in the South-Central Asian and Indian Ocean Region with support from the United States of America. The Indo-US nexus is designed to protect the world order created by the US in the 1990s which is in direct conflict with Chinese, Russian and Pakistani regional interests. This trend has been exacerbated since the Hindu nationalist Govt lead by Narendra Modi has assumed the high office in New Delhi, because it has convinced itself to dovetail Indian regional ambitions with the US global interests in a hope to hegemonize the region, even if it comes in direct conflict with the Chinese, Russian and Pakistani interests made evident by its support for the ethno-nationalist terrorist groups in Pakistan's Baluchistan province

⁵ "India, US Sign Logistics Exchange Agreement: What You Need to Know," Ankit Panda, The Diplomat, Aug. 30, 2016. <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/india-us-sign-logistics-exchange-agreement-what-you-need-to-know/>

which also threatens the Russian North-South Corridor project with Iran,⁶ as well as the 51 billion dollar China, Pakistan Economic Corridor project.⁷

In the view of India's growing relations with the US, the 'intelligentsia' in Moscow had to make the Russia-Pakistan ties independent of the 'India factor', which couldn't have come at a better time for Pakistan as an independent bilateral relationship does set a very fertile playing field for the future evolution of the Pakistan – Russia rapprochement, perhaps one day even to a strategic level. Pakistan believes that its relationship with Russia has solid ground of its own, the two countries face common challenges, and therefore it would be wise for Moscow keep its budding relationship with Islamabad completely independent from Moscow's relationship with New Delhi.

WARM WATERS

Much has been written about the desire of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to reach the 'Warm Waters' of the Arabian sea and the challenges it faced over the past centuries which prevented it from happening. The British Empire did everything it could to make sure the Russian Empire doesn't realize this dream; the buffer state of Afghanistan was created to stop any attempts by the Russian Empire to gain access to the warm waters. After the British Empire faded into history, the United States was able to persuade Pakistan to reject any rapprochement with Russia, therefore again preventing the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation from having access to the Pakistani ports. The geopolitical sands started to really shift in the 1990s when the United States imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan for its nuclear weapons program which was in a direct response to the Indian nuclear weapons program for deterrence purposes and for maintaining strategic stability in South Asia.

On the other hand, India remained the largest weapons importer for Russia and a valuable ally, which in turn prevented Moscow from any serious rapprochement with Islamabad. This trend continued to haunt the relationship between Moscow and Islamabad until the Western invasion of Afghanistan under the pretext of the so called 'War on Terrorism'. The American war in and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan continues to alter geopolitical dynamics as India jumps on the American bandwagon, and Pakistan continues to be bullied by Washington for doing its dirty work in Afghanistan, the relations between Moscow and Islamabad continue to thaw.⁸ Due to this thaw in relations, both countries continue to cooperate in various avenues, like the Russian financed \$2 Billion dollar 'North, South' Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) pipeline project⁹ and the sale of Mi-35 assault helicopters¹⁰ for Pakistan's counter-terrorism requirements. The growth in

⁶ "India's Geopolitical hate for Pakistan is sabotaging the North-South Corridor," Andrew Korybko, Katehon Think Tank, Aug 30, 2017, <http://katehon.com/article/indias-geopolitical-hate-pakistan-sabotaging-north-south-corridor>

⁷ CPEC – China Pakistan Economic Corridor, <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

⁸ "Here's Why President Putin Should Visit South Asia This Year," Andrew Korybko, Sputnik News Agency, Jan 13, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201701131049565244-why-putin-should-visit-south-asia-this-year/>

⁹ "Pakistan, Russia sign agreement for construction of North-South gas pipeline," DAWN, Oct 16, 2015. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>

¹⁰ "Pakistan's tool of war: Why the Mi-35 Hind-E is an excellent choice," Ali Osman, DAWN, Sep 29, 2015. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1209539>

relations is leading to calls for a full Russian participation in the China, Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project and such calls were positively answered by Russia.¹¹ It would therefore be safe to assume that Moscow's long held warm water dream is about to turn into a reality through its participation in CPEC.¹²

AFGHANISTAN QUESTION

As Moscow hosted a strategic tri-lateral meeting¹³ between Chinese, Pakistani and Russian delegations to find a settlement to Afghanistan issue, the detractors watched with interest. This tri-lateral meeting was the third such event but first to be hosted in Russia. The purpose of these meetings is to find a regional solution and develop a long-term strategic understanding between three regional capitals for finding a long-lasting solution to the instability in Afghanistan and specifically to defeat the threat posed by the Afghan branch of the Middle Eastern terrorist group IS also known as Daesh. Pakistan has played a key role in creating a regional consensus through this platform as Pakistan remains the most dominant player in Afghanistan and holds the 'key to the castle'. Pakistan has always promoted a 'grand consensus' as a long-term solution for Afghanistan, an arrangement which opens doors for the Afghan Taliban to be absorbed into the political apparatus of Afghanistan, a proposition opposed by India. Therefore, it remains Pakistan's constant ambition to broker peace in Afghanistan by bringing all opposing sides to the table, including the Afghan Taliban as exemplified by Islamabad's support for the deal signed between the Kabul government and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.¹⁴

Keeping this strategy in view, Pakistan has played its role in bridging the differences between the Afghan Taliban, China and Russia. The declaration of the meeting stated that the three partners wish to remove a number of Afghan Taliban leaders from the sanction list and hope to cooperate with them for a long-lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has also actively worked to broker a copper mining deal¹⁵ between China and Afghan Taliban in order to foster a working relationship and trust between the two parties. In this context, it can be established that Pakistan shares common interests with Russia in Afghanistan and in the Central Asian region which is important for Moscow from a security point of view and for Pakistan from an economic point of view. This cooperation is very important as it has strategic objectives and is expected to be a major defining factor for the emerging geopolitical axis between Pakistan, Russia, and China.

¹¹ "Russia supports China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project: Russian envoy Alexey Y Dedov, Sachin Parashar, The Economic Times, Dec 19, 2016. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/russia-supports-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-project-russian-envoy-alexey-y-dedov/articleshow/56037725.cms>

¹² "Pakistan allows Russia to use Gwadar Port for exports," Sputnik News Agency, Nov 26, 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/business/201611261047871226-pakistan-russia-gwadar-port/>

¹³ "Moscow to hold crucial meeting with China, Pakistan to discuss Afghanistan," Ayaz Gul, Voice of America, Dec 17, 2016. <http://www.voanews.com/a/moscow-to-host-crucial-meeting-with-china-pakistan-to-discuss-afghanistan/3640094.html>

¹⁴ "Pakistan backed HIA-Kabul talk, says Hekmatyar's Side," Tahir Khan, The Express Tribune, Dec. 27, 2106. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1275819/pakistan-backed-hia-kabul-talks-says-hekmatyars-aide/>

¹⁵ "Taliban says ok for China to develop huge Afghan copper mine," Andrew Topf, Mining.com, Dec. 16, 2016. <http://www.mining.com/taliban-says-ok-china-develop-huge-afghan-copper-mine/>

COUNTERTERRORISM

Keeping the mutual interest in regional stability in view, it is only logical for Pakistan and Russia to cooperate in the area of counter-terrorism. In September, last year a landmark counter-terrorism exercise was held¹⁶ between the Russian and Pakistani Special Operations Forces at Pakistan's elite Special Warfare Training School in Cherat. The exercise which went ahead despite India's vehement resistance¹⁷ was befittingly named as 'Druzhba (Friendship)-2016', during which both sides had an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge. This exercise was the very first military exercise between Pakistan and Russia with a focus on counter-terrorism training to be held in Pakistan. It has been learned that another bilateral military exercise is being planned to further deepen the critical counter-terrorism cooperation which has only seen an increase in its importance due to emerging threats which pose challenges to the security of both countries.

Russian President has expressed willingness to conduct sales of most advanced Russian military equipment¹⁸ to combat terrorism. This is an interesting prospect for Pakistan which requires advance equipment for its counter-terrorism operations. Russian defense manufacturers also participated in the IDEAS-2016 defense exhibition¹⁹ in Karachi to present their offerings and to further enhance industrial cooperation with their Pakistani counterparts. Through this growing cooperation in technical and training regimes, Russia and Pakistan are ushering confidence into an emerging regional partnership for maintaining peace and stability in the region. This partnership when fully adopted will prove to be mutually beneficial for both countries and will further strengthen the bond between Pakistan and Russia.

¹⁶ "First Russia-Pakistan Druzhba-2016 military drills kick off in Cherat," Sputnik News Agency, Sep. 24, 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201609241045655264-russia-pakistan-drills-defense/>

¹⁷ "India's first-ever InfoWar against Russia was a failure," Andrew Korybko, Katehon Think Tank, Sep 27, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/indias-first-ever-infowar-against-russia-was-failure>

¹⁸ "Russia is ready to provide most advanced anti-terror gear to its customers," TASS News Agency, Dec. 12, 2016. <http://tass.com/defense/918705>

¹⁹ IDEAS 2016 Official Website, <http://www.ideaspakistan.gov.pk/>

FORECAST

- Emerging trends of geopolitical realignment in the region will continue to bolster the economic and strategic cooperation between Pakistan and Russia under the multipolarity doctrine.
- Pakistan will be keen to cultivate a deep bilateral 'strategic partnership' with Moscow which must be independent of Russia, India relations, to be modeled after Islamabad's ties with China, in order to gain further diplomatic, economic and military independence from the American influence in order to increase its own national power.
- Russia will come to decide in favor of formally joining the China, Pakistan Economic Corridor project to solidify its emerging partnership with Islamabad and to have a tangible role in the South Asian region. Pakistan will also greatly benefit from various Russian investments.
- Counter-terrorism and separatism cooperation will continue to be a major factor in the Russia-Pakistan relationship both bilaterally and under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization framework.
- Pakistan would expect Russia to rectify challenges blocking its bid²⁰ for observer status in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

²⁰ "Pakistan-Armenia Friction Has Intensified," Eduard Abrahamyan, The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 13, Issue 197, Dec. 15, 2016.
<https://jamestown.org/program/pakistan-armenia-friction-intensified/>

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