

## **China-Russia-Pakistan Strategic Triangle: Imperative Factors**

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### **ABSTRACT**

China, a rising power and Russia, a great power of the past is currently pursuing the aspiration to regain its lost glory, are at the center stage of Asian geopolitics. Starting from the first decade of twenty first century, the extra tilt of Russia's moderate ally India towards the US is ringing alarm bells for China, Russia and Pakistan more or less with an equal spell. Indian tilt towards the US culminating in a nuclear deal between the two in 2008 (Baker, 2008), specifically, post nuclear deal strategic partnership provides the former with a punch to pose a challenge to its two sheer competitors Pakistan and China. In fact, this emerging engagement between Indo-US is based on their shared interest of complicating the security calculations of Pakistan and China. Thus, the strategic partnership between India and the US provides a significant variable to Pakistan to dramatically change the dimensions of its security and strategic relationship with Asian powers such as China and Russia. For Pakistan this partnership will provide it not only an option to maintain balance in the region vis a vis India but it will also provide it with an alternate to the US in the form of realigning its relationship with Russia and China. While shunning off increasing US sway in near abroad is in the interests of both China and Russia, so, this emerging strategic triangle will mutually reciprocate their respective interests. Although, India is obsessed with a desire to become regional hegemon independently pose a significant threat to regional balance and stability in South Asia, its strategic partnership with the US acts moderately as a force multiplier. So, for Pakistan being a major stakeholder in the regional affairs, prudence dictates to cultivate and enhance its strategic relationship with its time tested friend China as well with Russia. The current paper will attempt to access the imperative factors bringing China, Russia and Pakistan closer to form a strategic triangle. It will explore the political, geo-economic and geo-strategic areas of convergence for greater cooperation between this emerging triangle. What are prospects and challenges in the way of development of a strategic triangle between China-Russia and Pakistan that is emerging as a response to a direct threat from Indo-US strategic partnership to gain a hold over regional affairs?

**Key words:** China, Russia, Pakistan, India, U.S, Geo-strategic & Geo-economic

### **Indo-US strategic and defence partnership**

Although, the cold war philosophy of India to remain non-aligned and aversion to foreign partnership has not vanished entirely but it started fading away gradually

after disintegration of the former USSR. The end of cold war changed the nature and dimension of relationship between India and the US, as opposed to the Cold War apprehensive relationship with the US –when India was enjoying close relations with USSR- both the countries gradually started moving closer deepening and strengthening their defence and strategic cooperation. A remarkable shift in its cold war attitude started during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when realizing that both the countries have convergence of interest, started getting closer to each other. At that time their partnership was at embryonic stage, it was their beginning to move closer.

After 22 years of Jimmy Carter’s visit to India in 1978 the visit of the US President Bill Clinton to India in March 2000 proved an ice breaker in the chilling relationship between the two countries (Riedel, 2019). During the trip it was declared by the leadership of both countries that India and the US are natural allies. Since then an upward trajectory started between India and the US who were earlier termed as estranged democracies. The shift in focus of the US attitude away from Pakistan and gradually heading towards India was in contrast to President Bill Clinton’s five day visit to India and a few hours stay in Pakistan. This visit proved very fruitful and productive for the bilateral relationships between the two countries as it wiped off the decades-long existing famine of the US presidential visits to India.

The successors of Bill Clinton followed in his steps to visiting India, currently , the security and strategic relationship between them have deepened and strengthened enormously. The foundation of strong Indo-US relationship led by Bill Clinton reached on its climax during the reign of US President Bush. Amid mounting convergence of strategic interests, seeing potential for enhanced defence and security collaboration both the countries signed the momentous Next Step in Strategic Partnership agreement in 2004. It provided the foundation for cooperation on four core issues: missile defence, high technology trade, civilian space technology and civilian nuclear technology. Subsequently, this turning point culminated in the signing of nuclear deal between the two in 2008, paving way for the US to strengthen its strategic ties with India (Ganguly, Shoup & Scobell, 2006). In 2016, the US entitled India as ‘major defence partner’, a title unique to India as no other country has been given this title. Since then both the countries have signed many pact allowing each other’s defence forces to use their respective military facilities along with the mutual sharing of real time sensitive military information (Kazmin, 2019).

The upward trajectory of strategic engagement between India and the US that was set in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is persisting very well today and it seems to remain on course in future. Under the current US president Donald Trump who has declared himself as a ‘Big, Big Fan’ of India, the progress seems to continue. The renaming of the oldest and largest US military Command from US Pacific Command to US-Indo Pacific Command in May 2018 by US Department of Defence vindicates the importance of India in the strategic calculations of the US with regard to Asia. Announcing the name change the US

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Secretary of Defence James Mattis described the name change as the recognition on part of the US of the importance of its relationship and alliance with the countries adjacent to Pacific as well as Indian Oceans for preserving regional stability and for the accomplishment of the shared vision of having Many Belts And Many Roads in the pacific region to counter the One Belt One Road initiative of China (Carlisle, 2018). This intensive engagement between India and the US although fundamentally is being forged to limit the China's diplomatic, economic and military assertiveness in the Pacific but at the same time it is equally alarming for Pakistan because it will profoundly alter the balance of power in the South Asian region in India's favor.

A steady upward trajectory in the bilateral strategic and defence relationship between India and the US crossed an important milestone with the signing of the first ever 2+2 ministerial level dialogue in New Delhi in September 2018 involving both the foreign and defence ministers of the two countries. The dialogues happened to be as major breakthrough for the further cementing and strengthening of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. The most significant outcome of the inaugural Indo-US 2+2 dialogue was the signing of Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). It will not only provide India access to advance defence system but also to optimally get use of its existing US-origin platforms (US Department of State, 2018). Following the success of 2018 Indo-US 2+2 dialogue, the second round of the dialogue took place in December 2019 in the US, reflecting the swiftly developing strategic partnership between India and the US. The meeting brought about significant accomplishments with regard to defence and strategic relations between India and the US. Signing of the Security Industrial Annex (SIA) as part of General Security of Military Information Agreement proved as the crown jewel of the second 2+2 dialogue. Under this agreement not only enhanced technology transfer and information sharing will occur but it will also provide a mechanism to pursue and co-develop defence manufacturing between the two (Qi, 2019).

Apart from SIA, both sides reiterated their commitment to deepen their strategic partnership and reached to sign a number of other agreements including placement of liaison officers, basic exchange and cooperation agreement and the decision to hold India- US joint tri- services exercises named as 'Tiger Triumph' on annual basis (Chaudhury, 2019) . Such developments indicate that both the countries have placed security, defence and strategic relationships at the center stage and forefront to advance their shared interest in the region. For India it is imperative to have US support for countering expanding military and economic weight that China holds in the region at the same time for the US, India seems to appear as an eager partner to check the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus Indo-US alignment will serve the purpose of killing two birds with one stone; it will not only serve US interest in the region that is to balance the rise of China through enhanced cooperation with India but it will also disturb the balance of power between India and Pakistan helping the former to fulfill its desire to become a regional hegemon.

## **Pakistan's concerns over Indo-US strategic partnership**

The famous saying that in international politics there are no permanent friends or foes but only permanent interests, best exemplify rapid changing policies, perceptions and priorities of the US with regard to Pakistan over the course of time. This rapid changing attitude of US towards Pakistan of picking it at times where the former needed its active cooperation to achieve desired regional objectives and afterwards leaving it alone to face the consequences of its cooperation proves the US as a fair weather friend of Pakistan. Whether, it be 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or post 9/11 War On Terrorism the US choose Pakistan in time of necessity and left it after achieving its desired objectives. Non-recognition of Pakistan's role that it has played in US War On Terrorism and intensifying strategic and defence cooperation of the US with its arch rival India compels Pakistan to look for diversifying its relationship to maintain a balance of power in its relation vis-a vis India. Being nuclear powers and key states in the South Asian region the nature of mutual relationship between Pakistan and India plays the role of a significant variable for determining the whole security architecture of the region. Being cognizant of the fact that the rise of India with or without the help of any extra regional power will contribute towards the spoilage of regional stability and balance of power, the growing Indo-US strategic and defence cooperation rings grave alarm bells for Pakistan.

While analyzing the foreign and defence policies of Pakistan Dr. Rasul Bakhsh Rais writes "Pakistan's defence and foreign policies have been India-centered from the beginning; for over half a century Pakistan's security dilemma has centered on how to balance, counter, and if necessary, fight the Indian threat; unconsciously borrowing from the Realist paradigm, the managers of Pakistan's security tried to address this dilemma by adopting two classic approaches: alliances with major world powers to augment defense capability, and (from the 1970s onward), nuclear deterrence to offset India's conventional superiority" (Rais, 2005). Although Pakistan and the US share a history of chequered relationship but still historically the former has relied a great deal on the later for technological and defence assistance, but with the changing nature of geo-political and economic landscape on the global level has brought a significant shift in the bilateral relationship between the both. The shift of US focus has markedly been tilted towards India causing perilous conditions for Pakistan owing to the volatile nature of relationship between India and Pakistan.

According to the US national defense strategy and national security strategy a stark shift in the focus of US strategy from fighting global terrorism to managing major power rivalries has occurred in Donald Trump's administration (US Department of defence, 2018). Consequently, in its policy towards South Asia the change in the shift of focus has been materialized in its policy towards both Pakistan and India. India with whom the US shares common anxieties against the rising power of China, is getting mounting significance on the radar screen of the

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US, on the other hand Pakistan who did enjoy a special status during the War on Terrorism is gradually becoming less significant for the US. The strategic focus shift of the US towards India coupled with a number of other factors resulted in the form of troubled relationship between US-Pakistan relationships. In August 2017, in his first talk about South Asian policy, Pakistan was openly denounced and accused for facilitating the 'Safe Heaven' for terrorist organizations, by President Trump. Repeatedly, in his very first tweet in 2018, President Trump accused Pakistan of providing 'nothing but lies and deceits 'in return of multibillion US aid over past 15 or so years (Kronstadt, 2019). Since then, about more than \$ 1.1 billion as security assistance to Pakistan has been cut off by the US. On September 1, 2018 the decision was made to cut off the \$ 300 million assistance to Pakistan as part of the Coalition Support Funds that was originally suspended at the beginning of the 2018 (Pakistan Today, 2018).

Since the inception of Pakistan-US relationship, mutual dependencies, mutual suspicions and mutual disappointments have been the striking features of their bilateral relationship. The accusation of Pakistan for providing safe heaven to terrorist organization in the US Strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia and subsequently depreciating the role of Pakistan while providing a prominent role to India, led US-Pakistan relationship to the lowest ebb ever (Chaudhry, 2018). Despite having cooperation in many fields and the realization that the sustained rupture in ties with Pakistan will not benefit the US in its regional ambitions there appeared a downward trajectory in its relationship with Pakistan in general and specifically during Trump administration. In January 2018, the decision taken by Trump administration to cut off security assistance to Pakistan was an eye-opener for Pakistan. This and such kind of historical betrayals experienced by Pakistan at hands of the US indicate that Pakistan may be headed down in losing its support and partnership with the US at international level. Such actions in past as well currently along with a visible tilt of the US towards Pakistan's arch rival India cause serious concern for Pakistan. The setting up of stronger Indo- US relationship may lead to a regional instability by creating a polarized regional order (White, 2018) , in which the emergence of India as a regional power backed by the US may alter the regional balance of power between India and Pakistan, disturbing the strategic stability in the region.

### **Pakistan's relations with China and Russia**

Pakistan was the first country among all the Muslim world to recognize People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 (Husain, 1974) and afterwards established diplomatic ties in 1951. The relationship received an upward trajectory after the China-India war of 1962. Since then, both the countries are enjoying mutually reciprocated relationship passing through golden ages and is expected to get strengthened further in the decades to come (Rahman, 2007). Geo-economically and strategically both the countries are interdependent to safeguard their vital economic and strategic interests, and play complementary role for the attainment

of their respective regional and global interests. For China, the strategic partnership provides it considerable gains. The hand-over of Pakistan's deep water Gawadar port to China for forty years can provide it access to trans-shipment facilities because it is closely located to the International Sea Lines of Communications. For Pakistan this partnership provides all embracing opportunities to get economic dividends through China's economic initiatives like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and Gawadar Port. These projects are likely to further reinforce the strategic and economic cooperation between these two states.

Changes in the foreign policy goals and in regional and global orientations are the two factors that lie at the core of the changing nature of relationships between states. The Indo-US strategic cooperation specifically, post 2008 civil nuclear deal depicts a change in the regional orientation. While, both India and Russia have lost the convergence of interest that they used to have on Afghanistan during the Cold War. So, the changes in the foreign policy goals and regional orientation have led to the realignment of relationships between states. During the Cold War, owing to Pakistan's tilt towards the US and Russia's extra inclination towards India, both Russia and Pakistan could not build cordial relationship. However, that long established pattern of Pakistan's relationship with Russia appears to be fading away, chiefly, because of a recurring pattern of its off-again and on-again relationship with US. The major breakthrough in fostering better ties in the post-cold war era, happened when on the invitation of Russian President Putin, in 2003 President Pervez Musharraf went on a state visit to Russia (Rahman, 2007). It served as an icebreaker to the dormant bilateral relationship of the two countries as it opened the window of opportunities to discuss their mutually beneficial relationship at the highest level. Its inconvenient pattern of relationship with US and post 2008 nuclear deal strategic convergence between Indo-US compelled Pakistan to take a decision to diversify its relationship with Russia. The lifting of arms embargo from Pakistan by Russia in 2014 paved the way for an upward trajectory in their bilateral relationship. The joint drills known as "Arabian Monsoon", conducted between the naval forces during 2014 and 2015 and joint exercises code named as "Druzba" (Friendship) between the military forces of the two countries in 2016, 2017 and 2018 (Alam, 2018) is further strengthening the military aspect of the growing convergence in their bilateral relationship.

Keeping in view the changing regional geo-economic, political and geo-strategic dynamics both the states' whim to recalibrate their relationship resulted in the positive development of the signing of the first ever defence agreement between the two countries in 2014 (Bonder, 2014). Since 2014, after the signing of milestone defence agreement the security partnership between the two Cold War rivals has been strengthened and expanded significantly. The buying of four Mi - 35M combat helicopters, signing of the Rare Military Cooperation Pact in 2018 to train the service members of Pakistan in the Russian federation (Gul, 2018), in March 2019, the thirteenth consecutive annual meeting of the Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability that was set up in 2003 to discuss the

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areas of mutual concern with regard to regional and global security (Meeting of Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability, 2019) , further cemented the security and defence cooperation between the two significant players in the regional geo-politics. Being aware of the complementary role that both can play for their respective geo-economic, political and strategic interests in the midst of changing political, economic and strategic regional landscape, Pakistan and Russia have been successful in developing cordial and collaborative relationship in the recent years. The cynicism of their past bitterness seems to disappear gradually.

### **China- Russia-Pakistan strategic triangle: compulsive factors**

While living in and interacting with one another in an anarchic world, security and a sustainable economic development and stability are pre-requisites for ensuring the survival of any state. For that matter at times states having convergence of interests enter into alliances to address the potential or existing threats and challenges posed by the hostile states. Changes in global orientations, geopolitics, geo-economics, and opportunities for cooperation in energy and economic sector and maintaining regional strategic stability are the driving factors to forge strong cooperation between China-Russia and Pakistan. The prospects of evolving of a strategic triangle between three states into a mature axis are considerably very high owing to their convergence of interest both in matters of economic development and security related concerns. For Russia and China the common threat to their respective regional interests and main hindrance that limit their respective abilities in shaping the regional security environment in their interests is growing influence of US in their vicinity. For Russia, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and for China, US alliances in the Indo-Pacific region is the chief potential threat to their interests. In this context the strategic partnership between China and Russia is grounded in geopolitical reality besides, a number of shared economic, strategic and diplomatic interest magnetically bring the two closer for cooperation (Chase et al., 2017). Strategic significance of India has increased in the eyes of US on account of the vital role that former can play to contain China that is being considered US long term goal of its pivot to Asia policy (Congressional Research Service, 2013). India, having both nuclear and military power enjoys a strong position in this crucial Asian region; with US support it has the potential to build up its military and economic prowess to destabilize strategic stability in the region to balance the rise of China. Thus Indo-US alignment will serve the purpose of killing two birds with one stone; it will not only serve US interest in the region that is to balance the rise of China through enhanced cooperation with India but it will also disturb the balance of power between India and Pakistan helping the former to fulfill its desire to become a regional hegemon.

At one hand, the ideological clashes of both Russia and China with US brought them closer to engage in the long run strategic partnership against their common enemy, to lessen its influence in their neighboring regions such as Central

Asia and Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, Pakistan and China too have a time tested and longtime strategic partnership against their mutual rival India to counterbalance its deep-rooted desire to become regional hegemon. So the ingression of Pakistan, China and Russia because of their commonality of interest evidently sends out signals of fledgling partnership against the growing Indo-US strategic partnership in the region.

### **Geo-political factors**

The US prolonged presence in Afghanistan since last eighteen years, Indian growing involvement in Afghanistan backed by tacit US support and Afghanistan's receptivity equally raise security concerns for Pakistan, Russia and China. Both China and Pakistan share border with Afghanistan and have vested interests in Afghanistan. For Russia, it is a well-known fact that it is a major stake holder in Afghanistan that is boarded with its near abroad, Central Asia. Maintaining a peaceful and stable environment in Afghanistan is essential for security of these countries driven by a mix of genuine security, geo-political and geo-economic interests are the main points of convergence between China, Russia and Pakistan (Hussain, 2019).

Geo-strategically Afghanistan is located so ideally that it acts as a bridge for connecting Central, South, East and West Asia (Pawar, 2011). The socio-economic, political and security stability of these regions is dependent on a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. So establishing and then maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan is a significant contributing factor for forging strategic cooperation between China, Pakistan and Russia, because regional security and economic prosperity is linked with the stability and peace in Afghanistan. The current and looming (in the backdrop of US withdrawal) precarious security situation and the political turmoil in Afghanistan is a serious cause of concern for Pakistan, China and Russia equally. Therefore, owing to shared vital interests of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and realization of the fact the role this emerging trio can play in gaining a favorable situation and a most imperative factor for the development of strong engagement among the three.

### **Geo-economic factors**

Although, China, Russia and Pakistan can differ on ideology but their economic and security consideration are highly interwoven to motivate them to work collaboratively to deter any threat posed by Indo- US maneuvers in the region. So maintaining and further strengthening individual as well as collective abilities to deter any threat in order to have peaceful and stable environment conducive for international economic and trade activities are the points all the three countries have in common. Their cooperation and collaboration is not only limited to security and political matters but they are gradually expanding it in the economic realm too. In order to pursue their respective individual and collective gains they

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are eager to cooperate on the new avenues of collaboration on the shared geo-economic interests. Russia's joining hands under the ambit of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one positive step in this direction. The overall ambition of China for BRI is astounding. Up to now, approximately more than sixty states (accounting for two-thirds of the world's population) have become part of BRI by signing projects or have shown interests. According to the estimates so far CPEC has been the largest of all amounting about \$68 billion. Deepening of economic ties with the Asian partners to counter the BRI initiative President Trump introduced the Build Act as opposed to the Obama administrations' Trans-Pacific Partnership. This consolidated the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), a U.S. government agency for development finance, with components of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) into a separate agency with a \$60 billion investment portfolio. Although, it is low in volume when compared with the China's more than \$ 1 trillion expected to be invested in BRI. But still it seeks crowding in a larger pool of private investment by underwriting risk (Chatzky & McBride, 2019).

Russia is keen to play the role of a prominent supporter and participant in the overall promotion and success of BRI. The signing of "Joint Statement on Cooperation on the Construction of Joint Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Projects" in 2015 (TASS, 2019) is the first concrete step in this regard. In response to Russia's participation in BRI and Russian president Vladimir Putin's proposal to connect the northern sea route with BRI during the first Belt and Road Forum on international cooperation, published in a white paper in January 2018, China in its Arctic Policy announced its readiness to build Ice Silk Road (Descamps, 2019). For Eurasian Continent, the Russian-Chinese joint construction of Ice Silk Road will not only provide new options for the interconnectedness but it will also contribute in the development of the Northeast of China and Far east of Russia. Since, CPEC is the flagship project under BRI, the significance of the role that Pakistan can play owing to its blessed geostrategic location cannot be undermined. The enhanced cooperation between China, Russia and Pakistan on BRI can promote it as a counterbalance to the US pivot to Asia policy. The mutual economic interdependency, shared mounting US sway in Asia strengthens the prospects of greater economic cooperation between these states.

### **Strategic stability**

One compulsive factor for Pakistan to look for other options is that historically US support to Pakistan has never been permanent, but it always remained subject to change from 1979 USSR invasion of Afghanistan to post 9\11 US war on terror. So, for Pakistan prudence dictates that it must align itself with regional powers such as China and Russia with whom it enjoys convergence of interests on long term basis. Thus it is vital for Pakistan to strengthen its relations with Russia to fill the void that has been created after the US halted its security related aid. One thing that motivates Pakistan to strengthen its partnership with China and to reinvigorate

its relationship with Russia is that greatest threat to its security posed by the arch rival India could not be managed relying solely on its relationship with the US. The US, with whom Pakistan is experiencing half hatred and half trust sort of relationship could not guarantee defending long-term dimensions of the security threats posed by India. The recent US tilt towards India and supporting its bid to join Nuclear Suppliers Group, post nuclear deal strategic partnership vindicate this fact. Thus, for Pakistan seeking an alternate to US in the form of China and Russia is the need of the hour.

Russia sees the continuous rise of China promising to attain a balanced international system by chipping away at global preponderance of the US. Since Kremlin era Russia has relied on China as a major counterweight to the global dominance of US. So, both the countries are very well aware that coordinating their policies at regional and global levels will not only enhance their standing but will also make them able to better protect their interests ( Treninn, 2012) in the midst of ever increasing involvement of the US in Asia by making alliances with their regional competitors. Keeping in view its return to South Asia policy, in Russia's strategic and foreign policy calculations Pakistan is grabbing prominent position. Russia seems keen to rekindle its relationship with Pakistan with the intention of balancing out pro-America pivot of India after India's resolve to fully cooperate with the US in Indo-Pacific for containing China ( Korybko, 2019) . Despite the fact, that none of the state except Pakistan in case of India, is overly concerned about a direct and independent threat from their opponents but the inherent threat deeply seated in Indo-US strategic partnership is cause of concern for all. It necessitates developing a strong relationship based on shared interest of maintaining a balance and stability.

## **Conclusion**

The rapidly transforming international political structure is resulting in realignment of power relationships that were improbable previously. The emerging triangle between Russia, China and Pakistan vindicates the fact that how transformations at international political structure make the improbable, probable. Pakistan, apart from a staunch ally of China is gradually occupying special status in the strategic calculus of Russia. Growing US influence in the region, increased Indian involvement in Afghanistan backed by the US, expected US withdrawal from Afghanistan and post withdrawal security situation in the country along with other factors are the compulsive factors for drawing Pakistan, China and Russia closer for greater cooperation in geo-economic and geo-political arena.

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