
Pakistan-China-Russia Triangle: Implications on Regional Security

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The reinforcement of an axis or a strategic counter-alliance by China, Russia and Pakistan is being observed by the political analysts on the global scene. Though it might not be correct to assess that still the greater significance lies in this triangle as far as the regional security is concerned in the near future. What matters is the advent of congregating interests among these three states that eventually will evolve into a deeper engagement (Biswas, 2021). It is not possible to overlook how Pakistan-China-Russia triangle will lead, whereas Russia has invested relations with India simultaneously. Therefore, it is pertinent to address how this triangle will impact on the regional security. The primary objective of the paper is to explore the reasons of this triangle and its implication on regional security in future geopolitics.

Key Words: CPEC, Cold War, BRI, Indian Ocean, Shanghai Cooperation organization, BRICS, Pan-Eurasian, Russian-Led European Union, CARs

CPEC Strategic Chessboard- The Launch Pad for Future Alliance among Three Regional Actors

The historic Pak-China relations have always played a key role in Asian geo-politics. The economic corridor is recent case in point. The global strategic environment would continue to be multifaceted due to remarkable geopolitical changes that have taken place recently in the South Asia. New patterns of friends are evolving and foes are broken. Pakistan and India have been in opposite camps since their inception as independent states. India had a strategic relationship with Russia whereas Pakistan was close to the US and had been an ally in the Cold war against Russia. While, Pakistan and China are all-time strategic partners in the region and his bilateral equation serves as a peace stabilizer in the fragile South Asia. The friendship further rippled with the inauguration of CPEC, a flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With the estimated investment of \$65 billion under the CPEC, China has become the biggest foreign investor in

Pakistan. The investment speaks volumes about the two states continued friendship-a symbol of stability in the region.

Apart from the beginning of an uneasy relationship, both Pakistan and Russia faced the economic and diplomatic repercussions of Afghanistan in the post-Soviet era. Bilateral ties between the two were not very promising because of Pakistan's tilt towards United States and Soviet Russia's leaning towards India. The upward-trajectory is witnessed in the relationship of Pakistan-Russia since 2012 when the Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kyani made an icebreaking visit to Moscow. Now both states are looking to enhance their bilateral relations in multiple domains in fact, Pakistan's presence in BRI due to CPEC and its membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and US strategic partnership with India set the stage for the positive growth of Pak-Russia ties. Pakistan and Russia conducted a joint military exercise in October 2017 and participated in various bilateral-multilateral forums. Russia had signaled its support for Pakistan's membership for nuclear supplier Group. Hence, the convergence of interests among Pakistan, China and Russia is developing a real politik scenario in the already fragile region of South Asia in terms of security. However, Russia is also following its larger goal i.e. making of a multi polar world order in which US influence will be decreased and Russian security ambitions can best be served. In this pursuit of security, Pakistan's significance for Russia is two dimensional as it considers Pakistan as a key player in the region. Firstly, it appears to be a passage to the Central Asian republics and Moscow would not desire instability in Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan's strategic position, can give Russia access to international market by connecting CAR's with Middle East and the Indian Ocean through CPEC and Gwadar port.

On the other hand, the alliance between Russia and Beijing is stronger than ever, no matter that they had been in alliances since the 1950s, but later they stood poles apart during the Cold War. However, both countries intend to extend their strategic outreach through bilateral and trilateral agreements. In this background, Moscow and Beijing might keep their presence in Afghanistan as well so as to avert the potential security threats due to instability (Sakhi, 2021). China and Russia had also facilitated the permanent membership of SCO to Pakistan. Pakistan's efforts to maintain peace and security in Afghanistan have been appreciated by Russia. The trio is also working on a formula to help bring peace and prosperity in the region as they did in the Afghan Peace Process's culmination into Doha accord, and further the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The future of

incipient world order stands on BRI and with the CPEC its flagship project both state are keen to expand their relations with Pakistan.

In the global chessboard, strategic realities changes with startling speed and the occurrence of strategic shift shape the future even before the realization of states.

Convergence of Interests between Pakistan-Russia

After Soviet Collapse, the relations between Russia and Pakistan have been at slow pace, however in the contemporary history, there seems to be a new turn in bilateral relationships(Kapoor, n.d). In a time span of a decade, the relationship between Islamabad and Moscow have been improved vis-a-viz with high-level visits and arms sales, yet the fact cannot be ruled out that there are certain issues where both countries have point of divergence as well(Dagia, 2021); On the other hand, Pak-US relations had been on bumpy in the past decade “Russia and Pakistan were not exactly the best allies during the cold war. But the two nations have made great amends in their bilateral relations in the last two years. Russia is also well aware of Pakistan-India dynamics in the region, and their leadership is quite aware that a closer relationship between Moscow and Islamabad will probably upset India. But it seems like the CPEC offer just might be too tempting for them to refuse” (Maqsood, 2017).

Pakistan and Russia’s Strategic Interest Align in Afghanistan

The shifts in geopolitical competition are evolving a new regional development. Pakistan Russia’s convergence greatly lies on the situation in Afghanistan and the accomplishment of CPEC. At the same time, Russia realizes that Pakistan’s defense needs are legitimate in order to maintain balance of power in the region. Moscow and Islamabad are getting closer militarily in recent times, with Russia’s decision of lifting its self-imposed arms embargo on Pakistan in November 2014 followed by military cooperation agreement that culminated joint military drills between the two states. The cooperation between the two states will be strengthened with the import of Mi-35 helicopters and Russian Kilmov RD-93 engines for JF-17 multi-role fighters. Both states also signed a deal for the construction of the North-South gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore.

For the first time Russia-Pakistan conducted a joint military exercise is the clear indication of Russia’s change of heart. The exercises happen at crucial time when the Uri attack happened and India was looking to take revenge from as it accused Pakistan of Uri attacks.

India surprised by Russian response in BRICS summit in October-2017; it shielded Pakistan against any negative reference in the Goa Convention.

The Push and Pull factors behind the Formation of Alliance

US- As Push Factor

The direct involvement of US in Ukraine and South China Sea is an example of its longstanding rivalry with China and Russia; the newly formulated alliance could support the territorial disputes as a single unit, haggard against one another and corresponding with the economic and security cooperation between the groups. Hence, the Pakistan-China-Russia alignment is largely shaped by common interests.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)- As Pull Factor

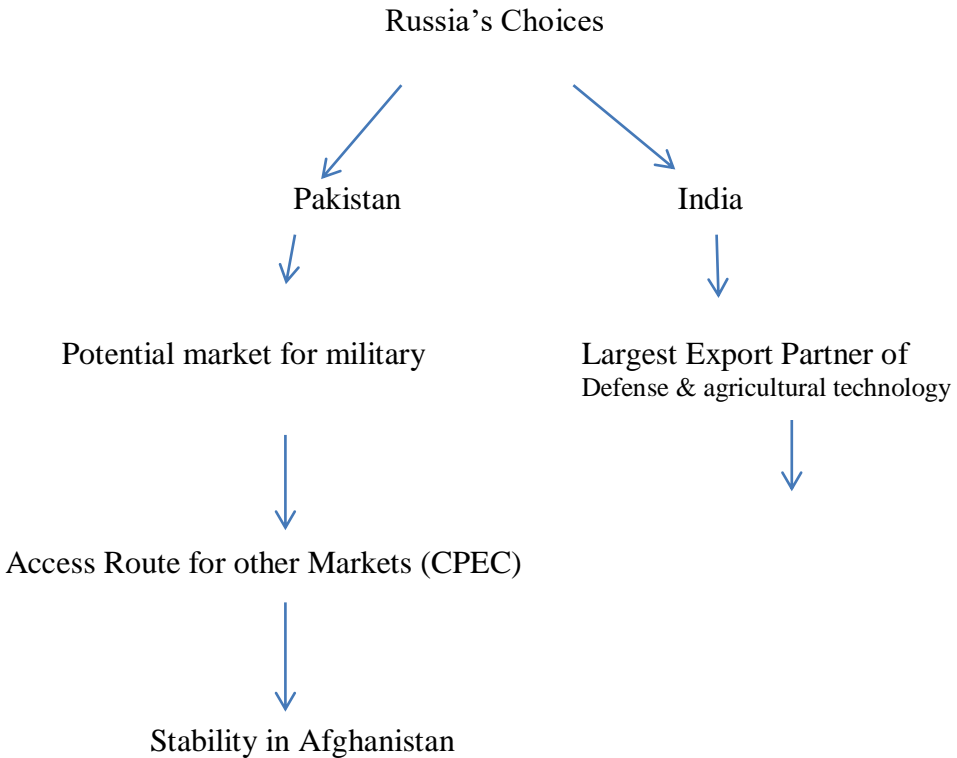
CPEC has a great influence as it can bring Pakistan closer to Pan-Eurasian integration because being the flagship project of BRI it has the prospects of linking of Pakistan with the Russian-led Eurasian Union (EAU), Iran, SAARC and China. Although the CPEC will not run through Russia, but there is possibility of branch routes likely to be connected through Xinjiang to Central Asian Republics (CARs) and beyond to connect Russia. The bordering territory of the Altai Republic connected to CPEC through Northern-focused branch route as well. The energy laden areas would give access to global markets which can Russia utilize to develop its Siberian region.

Russia's majestic strategic plan of becoming the superlative force in the Eurasian supercontinent inspired its leadership to revisit its relations with Pakistan and initiate a game changing and inclusive entente with her to deal with the common enemy i.e. ISIS in Afghanistan and work together in a win-win partnership through CPEC. The connotation of the embryonic defense relationship between both the states serves as a backbone for their evolving rapprochement and demonstration of new strategic thinking of both states towards South Asia.

Furthermore, the defense exports from Russia can enhance Pakistan's capacity in countering terrorism and could form the basis for future

enhanced military cooperation which may include jets, tanks and other munitions if things move in the right direction.

How would India react to Russia-Pakistan military ties considering that Russia is the biggest defense partner of India?



India's multi-aligned defense ties in recent years with US, Japan, Israel and France; all of which are moving away from Russia's prior market ascendancy in this strategic sector. The option for Russia is to seek new arms markets in the region for expanded defense relations. The joint drill between Russia and Pakistan at Druzhba in 2016 put the two states on a fast-track trajectory of developing these ties in the changing geo-politics of South Asia.

The most promising area of cooperation between the two states in the near future is Afghanistan. Moscow hosted number of peace conferences in recent past and Pakistan's presence in the talks demonstrate the Russian-

Pakistan alignment in term of the future role of Taliban as an anti-terrorist tool. This is a clear shift of Russia's strategic calculus of Cold War and attributed to the fear of ISIS infiltration into CARs which can destabilize them. Russia moved towards diplomatic solutions instead of using military might in Afghanistan by using the regional actors i.e. Pakistan in order to achieve results on the anti-terrorist front. Pakistan shares the long border with Afghanistan and had historic relation with both Kabul and Taliban. The strategic coordination between Islamabad and Moscow in this context can create new avenues of cooperation in future.

The reciprocally favorable convergence of interests in the shape of ISIS, Taliban's recognition as a legitimate actor and stability of Afghanistan is bringing the two states closer at lightning pace on this new strategic course. Apart from this the energy sector is another element which likely to deepen the relations between Pakistan and Russia; both have already kick started with the construction of North-South gas-pipeline. Pakistan needs alternate energy resources to meet its growing demand and Russians are well equipped in this sphere. The developing cooperation between the two capitals is emblematic to the world that both states are working in a demesne of traditional cooperation. Pakistan could get benefits from Siberian resources by piping through Xinjiang & CPEC route to enter into Pakistan. If the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) project would be materialized due political conflict surrounding it, then the Altai-Xinjiang pipeline would be a best choice for Pakistan.

The Convergence of Interests between China-Pakistan

The formidable leg between China-Russia-Pakistan triangles is the China-Pakistan link. Pakistan and China is the traditional ally and both had supported each other historically whether it is related military equipment or diplomacy. China had helped Pakistan in building its nuclear reactors for Pakistan and Pakistan produced and developed JF-17 fighter's jets with Chinese cooperation. Pakistan is the largest importers of defense equipment from China and now schedules to buy eight Chinese S20 or Yuan-class electric submarines (SSK). China has invested in Karakoram corridor and Gwadar Port. The mushrooming partnership between the India and US on strategic issues of shared interest in defense is the source of concern for Pakistan at times. Pakistan-US has bumpy track of relations's and with the Trump policy for Afghanistan touched its lowest ebb.

The Congruence of Interests among the Three

The congruence of interest between the three stems from US, For Russia and China US is an abhorrence which must be removed from its hegemonic position for their own security. Pakistan due to its longstanding conflict with India is willing to be the part of Asian security architecture that is designed by China. Russia wouldn't mind to establish its strategic relationship with Pakistan when India is diversifying the list of military supplier with the inclusion of US and Israel.

With regard to the western technology and energy supply, Russia is another alternative source for the region. Russia will have access to the new market for its defense equipment and likely to supply the defense equipment of both India and Pakistan. Russia's decision to arm Pakistan is significant in the sense that it will not give any preference to its old strategic partner i.e. India. No doubt, India is a growing economy with a huge market, and Moscow has an interest in preserving its relationship with India. But India had soured security ties with Pakistan and China, Moscow's divergence of interest with India is evident from its decision to move closer to China is growing more. China is economically stronger than the other two states with substantial foreign reserves looking to invest and in need of energy supplies.

Pakistan, with a huge bulk of young population, needs energy supplies and defense equipment. Pakistan is currently importing military equipment from China and with this new alignment will have access to Russian technology which in fact the source for many Chinese products too.

The reciprocal gambits between Moscow and Islamabad are driving force behind shift in international relations. In the Europe, Russia is involved in a confrontation with the west over Ukraine, and under western sanctions due to military adventure in Crimea. In the Asia-Pacific, the tension exacerbated between China and countries of Asia Pacific due to china's encroachment in South China Sea. These changes have pushed China and Russia to look for allies which will explain the affability between the two powers.

But the question is that whether partnership between countries could lead to an alliance when they had distrusted each other in a past. But the old proverb "the enemy of enemy is my friend" fits well here; the concurrent perception of the US and its policy of containment towards them is the most

important factors that supersedes all other. China needs new allies to change the world order and it starts with Asia.

Implications on Regional Actors and Extra-Regional Actors

India has taken the Russian-Chinese alliance of 2014 as a threat to its interest and discreetly directed against it, due to the sour history of its relation with China and its close ally Pakistan. India respond back to this alliance cracked a nuclear deal with US. The US on its part, poached India out of the multipolar block as it did with China in the cold war era. Russia woke up from the inertia with “Rusi-Hindi BhaiBhai” slogan had put most of its decision makers under until that point, aided as they were by China’s silent diplomatic intervention in helping to broker the Russian-Pakistani rapprochement due to their shared concerns surrounding Afghanistan.

Indian’s decision’s makers giving adherence to 'zero-sum' game in the persuasion of defense-strategic partnership with US instead of looking at the event from the 'Win-Win' prism which are applied by multipolar countries nowadays. Presently both Russia and India are on opposites sides of the blocks i.e. Unipolar and multipolar blocks in the new cold war era where Russia is getting closer to China, whereas India trying to mend ties with US. Regardless of the recent strategic difference between the two states, both are of geographical distance to one another that do not pose any direct security threat to each other. Even this helped to alleviate their relations in the current riotous transition and provided them an objective to strengthen their transactional-dependent relationship through more deals of weapons, energy and the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) via Azerbaijan and Iran. Despite the apparent change in the nature of relationship, there are still certain areas of convergence which will taper augmented weakening in the future, excluding any unanticipated scenarios to disrupt the partnership. For China and Pakistan, Russia has inimitable importance as a strategic partner to influence India and to preclude US from wholly upsetting the strategic balance between these three interrelated players.

It would be in Pakistan and China’s interest if Russia maintains its influence over India that could eventually pay out to their shared advantage in retention of the Status quo in South Asia in the face of Israel-Japan and US efforts to equipoise it to India’s errand.

Afghanistan will always remain a core issue while discussing any regional political scenario. The political road map of the country needs none other than a national consensus program because the conflict in Afghanistan is multidimensional. The countries differ in terms of their interests and that

justifies the relations of each country, at the end of the day demonstrating the realpolitik at play. The resurgence of Daesh (ISIS) in Afghanistan in last of couple years posed a serious security threat to the CARs and some which (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) had defense agreement with Moscow through the Collective Security Treaty organization(CSTO). The fear of Russia being drawn into CARs anti-terrorist swamp and would prefer to defeat it in its hometown i.e. Afghanistan either with the help of Afghan government or with the support of Taliban. The cost of losing the anti-terrorist fight in Afghanistan would be a huge stalemate for Russia; the ensuing destabilization in CARs would elicit an extraordinary humanitarian crisis in the region and an expected large number of refugees would flood Russia's unprotected border i.e. steppe-Siberian border with Afghanistan.

Therefore, it is high time for Russia to engage with Pakistan in working towards a political solution of Afghanistan considering the fact that Pakistan is indispensable for resolving the conflict there. Consequential to that the presence of ISIS into the battlefield of Afghanistan had completely changed the Russian perspective towards the conflict and it started viewing conflict from Pakistani prism that Taliban are effective tool which can be used to end this conflict.



Scenarios 1: Stability in Afghanistan

The Afghan conundrum is the leading determining factor behind Russian-Pakistani rapprochement and future engagements. The qualms of incessant uncertainty regarding peace in Afghanistan have opened up vistas of cooperation among regional players. It is an exceptional development that will change the contours of this volatile region.

The three players are inching closer to ratifying their relationship with the objective to bring stability by resorting to political options to end the

Afghan war. US announced its policy of with more troop surge in and acknowledging India's role in Afghanistan while condemning Pakistan doesn't go well with Pakistan. This situation has led Pakistan to seek a solution involving regional players i.e. Russia, China and Iran who are directly affected with uncertain conditions of Afghanistan.

Scenario 2: Eurasian Integration /Balance of Power

The Pakistan, China and Russia are heading towards becoming a power bloc of Eurasia in their own way despite not fitting into the category of a traditional alliance. But there shared key interest which lead to the strategic convergence. The Eurasian integration brings into line with Russian vision and outreach efforts of EAU. China plays a key role in integrating the two non-traditional partner of new era Pakistan and Russia with imminent partnership between the EAU and CPEC. Secondly, the three parties had serious concern over Afghanistan and efforts to formalizing a policy to achieve peace through the Russian peace process. The third factor is India, Pakistan and China security challenges in South Asia stems from India, and Moscow can play the role of mediator between the two sides by calming India to ensure peace in the region.

The convergence of interest between Pakistan, Russia and China cements their goal of Eurasian integration, balancing US and eliminating the terrorism in Afghanistan form a strategic gravity which holds the three powers together. Their shared objective needs a long term strategy which means that the trilateral alliance will be likely to get strengths from all players weight corresponding advantages in meeting these objectives. The observers hope that alliance will expected to enhance multilateral coordination on merging BRI (which includes CPEC), EAU an SCO.

Scenario 3: Economic Integration

China's increasing demand for energy and logistical security compliments Pakistan's need of infrastructure. Russia under sanction needs investment from china and sees OBOR as a blistering opportunity for revival of its economy and that led to it supports OBOR everywhere including Pakistan. During the Ukrainian crisis both China and Pakistan promoted sanctions on Russia. China needs Pakistan for much strategic reason and to keep influence in the Indian Ocean is on the top.

The inclusion of Pakistan in the SCO provided an opportunity to Moscow to work closely with the new ally as the organization takes on the more of multilateral integration role along with the economic sector. The SCO Bank could be used as a platform by Russia and Pakistan for financial interaction

in future and for free trade agreement between Pakistan and the Russian led EAU. The areas for bilateral investment are yet to be determined but agriculture is the sector in which Pakistan might present a of opportunities. With the completion of CPEC and its expansion to CARs and Siberia, the real-sector commercial relation will be amplified. The real-sector economic cooperation would cement the bilateral relations between the both states in furthering the development of political, military and ultimately the strategic relations. There are certain geographical and structural limitation to its achievement but the there is nothing that cannot be achieved as its outcome is highly positive for both sides.

Analysis

The brotherly relations between Pakistan and China are the motivating force behind the re-structuring of Pakistan-Russian relations. It has been speculated that China plays important role behind the beginning of historic rapprochement bearing the nature of relationship china shares with both States. China is playing the role of a 'balancer' between them and facilitates the initiated cautious settlement between them. China must be reminding it Moscow that it had promised support for Pakistan's integrity and opposing terrorism in all of its manifestation. The only concern for Russia is to think that whether the present day Pakistan is how far different from the cold war era of Afghan conflict.

Considering all these points and looking at the corridors of history as it unfolds, Pakistan now should redesign its foreign policy. Pakistan should make a fresh start by shedding its past. The Afghan entanglement, Indo-US nuclear deal, weak economy suggests Pakistan should re-define its foreign policy objectives.

New geo-strategic and geo-political setting requires new vision to look at things from different prism. A palpable mistake should be protracted and conceded into the future. Pak-Russians relations require a new kick start, but in this globalized world no state can live in isolation whether economically or politically. Therefore, Pakistan needs to maintain a balance its relation with western states and US and its relation with them should not be compromised due its new found love for Russia. The US and Western states are largest trading partners of Pakistan and had contributed in socio-economic development of the country. Pakistan in the process of re-visit

and re-formed foreign policy should adopt an evenhanded approach to all powerful states near or far to achieve its national security objectives.

The newly formed alliance concentrated on the changing dynamics of Afghanistan, they have common focus, common targets and this is the beginning of a new long term engagement. There is nothing temporary in their future plan. The new power troika of Pakistan, Russia and China inherits a great potential to generate in an era of peace in this region. The troika reduces the threat of nuclear war hanging like a Damocles' Sword on citizens of the Sub-Continent (Rizvi, 2017).

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