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## HAS PAKISTAN CHECKMATED INDIA IN ITS FOREIGN POLICY WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES, ESPECIALLY THE SUPER-POWERS, RUSSIA & CHINA? – A CRITICAL REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Russia recently announced that Russia and Taliban had “Shared Interests” in fighting ISIS(Daesh). He believes that the IS [Daesh] Afghan wing poses a great threat to the region as they are really global jihadists. This stand is problematic for India, Afghanistan and even the US. It will, however, be an advantage for Pakistan. Russia's position would be difficult for the Ghani government to accept, which has been fighting the Taliban for over a decade. Indian security officials believe Taliban is the greater malign force in Afghanistan, not ISIS. The UNSC panel observed that around half of ISIS members in Afghanistan were foreign, with a large portion of fighters hailing from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and returning Afghan fighters. After it officially denied reports that it had shown any interest in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Moscow has not just declared strong support for the China-funded project but also announced its intention to link its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC. India was further disturbed by Russia's decision to hold its first ever joint military exercise with Pakistan days after Uri terror strike which left 19 Indian soldiers dead. As the west has shunned Russia, slapped sanctions on it, Russia has moved towards China. In South China Sea, Russia has unquestioningly accepted the Chinese point of view, even conducting naval drills with China after the Tribunal judgment. India has no choice but to keep a steady hand on this relationship, diversify it to the extent possible. If US is indeed a stronger friend of India today, New Delhi should lobby more forcefully with Washington that it needs to find a way to repair its Moscow relationship, to maintain the balance of power.

**Keywords:** Taliban, Al-kaida, ISIS, CPEC, China-funded-project, sanctions, naval drills, India, China, Russia, Afghanistan..

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Zamir Kabulov a high-ranking official in Russia's foreign Ministry and also responsible for Russia's outreach to Pakistan, recently stunned everyone by announcing that Russia and Taliban had “Shared Interests” in fighting ISIS(Daesh). Kabulov stood out for his criticism of both India and Afghanistan, who had taken Pakistan to task for its continued support to terror groups. He believes that the IS [Daesh] Afghan wing poses a great threat to the region as they are really global jihadists. This stand is problematic for India, Afghanistan and even the US. It will, however, be music for Pakistan. Russia's position would be difficult for the Ghani government to accept, which has been fighting the Taliban for over a decade. India has not yet commented on this latest development. Indian security officials believe Taliban is the greater malign force in Afghanistan, not ISIS. This puts India, Russia and Iran on opposite camps, countries that fought together against the Taliban in the 1990s. The Taliban, which were hosts to al-Qaida, continue to be seen as the big enemy force in Afghanistan. The UNSC panel observed that around half of ISIS members in Afghanistan were foreign, with a large portion of fighters hailing from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and returning Afghan fighters.

Russia's nebulous public position on its growing ties with Pakistan continues to give sleepless nights to Indian policymakers who have sought to isolate Islamabad on the issue of terrorism. After it officially denied reports that it had shown any interest in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Moscow has not just declared strong support for the China-funded project but also announced its intention to link its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC. Russia continues to insist that its ties with Pakistan will not come at India's cost. Off late, Russia has moved towards China. In South China Sea, Russia has unquestioningly accepted the Chinese point of view, even conducting naval drills with China after the Tribunal judgment. India has no choice but to keep a steady hand on this relationship, diversify it to the extent possible, hopefully without making silly comparisons between Modi and Putin. If US is indeed a stronger friend of India today, New Delhi should lobby more forcefully with Washington that it needs to find a way to repair its Moscow relationship, to maintain the balance of power.



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### 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**(1) Indrani Bagchi (2016):** Afghanistan has asked Russia to respect state to state relations after the Russian ambassador to Kabul stunned the Afghan parliament by saying Russia and Taliban had shared interests in fighting ISIS/Daesh. Addressing the upper house of the Afghan parliament on the weekend, envoy Alexander Mantyskiy was quoted as saying, "Zamir Kabulov (a high-ranking official in Russia's foreign ministry) said our interests are the same as Taliban in fighting Daesh. ..." Kabulov is believed to be the chief driver of Russia's policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is believed to be responsible for Russia's outreach to Pakistan. During the recent Heart of Asia ministerial in Amritsar, Kabulov stood out for his criticism of both India and Afghanistan, who had taken Pakistan to task for its continued support to terror groups.

A few weeks ago, Kabulov was quoted by journalists as saying, "The IS [Daesh] Afghan wing - poses a great threat to us. That is dangerous for us because they are really global jihadists, that is the same as al-Qaida was at the beginning of its way in Afghanistan and they customized to Central Asia with all consequences for us. If this is indeed Russia's new stance on the Taliban and Daesh, it will be problematic for India, Afghanistan and even the US. It will, however, be music for Pakistan. Russia's position would be difficult for the Ghani government to accept, which has been fighting the Taliban for over a decade. If Russia, one of Kabul's big supporters and supplier of weapon systems, actually strikes a deal with Kabul's enemy no 1 to go after a third enemy, it could weaken the global coalition against Taliban, and their brand of extremism and terrorism. It would be hard for India and even the US to accept this as well, given that the US has spent over 15 years fighting them.

**(2) Sachin Parashar (2016):** Russia's nebulous public position on its growing ties with Pakistan continues to give sleepless nights to Indian policymakers who have sought to isolate Islamabad on the issue of terrorism. After it officially denied reports that it had shown any interest in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Moscow has not just declared strong support for the China-funded project but also announced its intention to link its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC. CPEC, which will link Gwadar in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province to Xinjiang in China, remains a major bugbear for Indian foreign policy as it passes through the Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan administered Kashmir claimed by India. Beijing has shown scant regard for India's concerns despite PM Narendra Modi himself having taken up the issue of Chinese involvement in the disputed territory with President Xi Jinping.

Moscow last month emphatically denied Pakistan media reports that it was looking to involve itself in CPEC by acquiring access to the port built by China at Gwadar. Russia's ambassador to Pakistan Alexey Y Dedov has now been quoted as saying that Russia and Pakistan have held discussions to merge Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union project with the CPEC. Dedov said Russia "strongly" supported CPEC as it was important for Pakistan's economy and also regional connectivity. The mixed signals emanating from Moscow, as strategic affairs expert Brahma Chellaney said, are injecting uncertainty in the direction of the Russia-India relationship whose trajectory long epitomized constancy and stability. It is as if Moscow no longer sees India as a reliable friend or partner. Indeed, by seeking common cause with India's regional adversaries — including by supporting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through internationally disputed territory and engaging with the Pakistan-backed Taliban — Russia is challenging India's core interests," said Chellaney.

**(3) Indrani Bagchi (2016):** Did Russia just stop being our BFF? The most unedifying sight in the past weeks for Indians has been to watch Russian crack combat troops conduct Druzhba-2016 exercises in Pakistan while Pakistani terrorists struck at Uri. Kind of ironic – the new and improved India-Russia relations were titled Druzhba-Dosti (2014), which was the last time President Vladimir Putin came to India.

Now, it's nice to have druzhba all around, but there are some no-go areas. Pakistan is one of them. You would think that 45 years after the friendship treaty, Moscow would get it. But it took a private dressing down by foreign secretary and a public chiding by India's envoy Pankaj Saran a week before an annual summit for Moscow to change its rhetoric. The Modi-Putin summit this weekend will make the right noises. India and Russia will probably sign the contract for Kudankulam 5 and 6, as the first four reactors chug along nicely. India will get Kamov helicopters, some more Sukhois, and perhaps the Akula submarines.



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And that is the nub of the matter. As the west has shunned Russia, slapped sanctions on it, Russia has moved east. To China. Chinese students go to Russia, as do Chinese tourists. Russia is now almost completely subservient to China, and don't believe people who tell you Russia is a proud power and will not subject themselves to the Chinese. They have altered the terms of engagement completely. Indians have been alarmed at the depth and quality of the Russia-China relationship. Moscow is sharing military technologies with Beijing that would have been unimaginable earlier. Just as an example, the JF-17 has the same engine that powered the MiG-29s and 35s.

### 3. FINDINGS

- Russian side recently announced that their interests are the same as that of Taliban in fighting the Afghan ISIS(Daesh). Not only this, Russian foreign ministry stood out for its criticism of both India and Afghanistan, who had taken Pakistan to task for its continued support to terror groups. They believe that IS [Daesh] Afghan wing - poses a great threat to them than the Taliban. While this stand of Russia favours Pakistan but it would be hard for India and even the US to accept this, given the fact that the US has spent over 15 years fighting them. Indian security officials, however, believe that Taliban is the greater malign force in Afghanistan, not ISIS. This puts India, Russia and Iran on opposite camps, countries that fought together against the Taliban in the 1990s.
- Iran may find reason to be sympathetic to the Russian view because until 2015, Iran had flirted with the Taliban as both were fighting the same enemy i.e. US. Now, Iran has emerged as the biggest opposition to ISIS in Iraq and Syria. It is conceivable that Iran could once again tolerate Taliban in return for action against ISIS. The Russian outreach to Pakistan also has the ISIS element as a persuading factor. But the fact remains that the Taliban, which were hosts to al-Qaida, continue to be seen as the big enemy force in Afghanistan. ISIS/Daesh has been operating largely in the eastern provinces of Nangarhar in Afghanistan. ISIS cadres are also largely drawn from the TTP, who have been driven out by Pakistan following the Zarb-e-Azb operations, and therefore hostile to Rawalpindi.
- The UNSC 1267 monitoring committee in its latest report says ISIS has been weakening in Afghanistan since 2015. The committee noted the number of ISIL fighters in eastern Afghanistan had dropped to about 1,600 and located mainly in the districts of Deh Bala, Kot, Achin and Naziyan in Nangarhar Province. About 200 ISIL fighters were based in Kunar province. The UNSC panel observed that around half of ISIS members in Afghanistan were foreign, with a large portion of fighters hailing from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and returning Afghan fighters.
- Russia's proximity with Pakistan continues to give sleepless nights to Indian policymakers who have sought to isolate Islamabad on the issue of terrorism. After it officially denied reports that it had shown any interest in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Moscow has not just declared strong support for the China-funded project but also announced its intention to link its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC. CPEC, which will link Gwadar in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province to Xinjiang in China, remains a major bugbear for Indian foreign policy as it passes through the Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan administered Kashmir claimed by India. Beijing has shown scant regard for India's concerns despite PM Narendra Modi himself having taken up the issue of Chinese involvement in the disputed territory with President Xi Jinping.
- Russia and Pakistan have held discussions to merge Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union project with the CPEC. Russia "strongly" supported CPEC as it was important for Pakistan's economy and also regional connectivity. The mixed signals emanating from Moscow, are injecting uncertainty in the direction of the Russia-India relationship whose trajectory long epitomized constancy and stability. It is as if Moscow no longer sees India as a reliable friend or partner. India continues to officially maintain that it doesn't see any "downward trend" in relations with Russia even as it works behind the scenes to convince Moscow that Pakistan remained the fountainhead of terrorism in the region. For India though, Russia further queered the situation in Afghanistan by declaring that it regarded Afghan Taliban as a national military-political movement. Russia is looking to engage the Taliban apparently to defeat IS. Since, Russia's doublespeak



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on Pakistan got exposed, India officially conveyed to Moscow that India was disturbed by Russia's decision to hold its first ever joint military exercise with Pakistan days after Uri terror strike which left 19 Indian soldiers dead.

- Again, at the BRICS Goa summit in October, 2016, Russia chose not to help India and publicly name Pakistan based terrorist outfits like Lashkar and Jaish in the official declaration in the face of Chinese resistance. Russia continues to insist that its ties with Pakistan will not come at India's cost. Asked about the Russia-Pakistan military exercise though, at the recent Heart of Asia conference, Russia's presidential envoy to Pakistan Zamir Kabulov 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. India may or may not complain, but it's certainly watching with eyes wide open.
- Indian business continues to give Russia a wide berth, while Russians have been burnt with Sistema and MTS. The challenge for New Delhi and Moscow is to find some economic ballast for an otherwise defence supplier and strategic partner. In the past year, India has invested in Rosneft, and increased its energy investments in Russia significantly. Diamonds have been a bright spot in a dull economic market, and Indian pharma company Wockhardt will be making in Russia. From railways to energy, it's the Indian public sector that continues to bet big on Russia.
- And that is the nub of the matter. As the west has shunned Russia, slapped sanctions on it, Russia has moved eastward i.e. to China. Russia is now almost completely subservient to China, and don't believe people who tell you Russia is a proud power and will not subject themselves to the Chinese. They have altered the terms of engagement completely. Indians have been alarmed at the depth and quality of the Russia-China relationship. Moscow is sharing military technologies with Beijing that would have been unimaginable earlier. Just as an example, the JF-17 has the same engine that powered the MiG-29s and 35s.
- In South China Sea, Russia has unquestioningly accepted the Chinese point of view, even conducting naval drills with China after the Tribunal judgment. In fact, Russia is making no attempt to balance its China tilt. It could, for instance, open a channel with the Japanese, but refuses to do so. The India relationship is actually its only balance in Asia. In BRICS, India, Russia and Brazil could balance out Chinese power – but that is not happening.
- India is conscious of this, and has gone to great lengths to protect the special quality of the Russia relationship. But, some in Moscow and some in New Delhi will say that India has been unfaithful too, by cosying up to the Americans and this is the natural consequence of Indian strategic promiscuity. But since the end of the Cold War, Moscow and Washington have deepened their relationship in ways that India and the US really cannot match.
- Until Washington took the ill-advised step of pushing NATO's borders eastwards towards Ukraine, prompting Russia to go into Crimea and Ukraine. From there on, the US-Russia relationship has been in free-fall. It has had the greatest impact on India's security interests. India is collateral damage.
- India held its nose and refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Crimea or its actions in Ukraine, recognizing Russian interests in this area, though it's a replay of the time when, several decades ago, India had stayed silent during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Even on Syria, India hews more closely to the Russian position than US's. It's certainly better than handing out weapons to any bad guy who does not like Assad.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

- Keeping in mind the fact that in spite of being a much smaller country than India, Pakistan has been able to position itself strategically decisive factor in the region. In other words, Pakistan is more fitting in the



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scheme of the things of Russia and China than India. It is a fact well known to the entire world that Pakistan is a hub and a safe haven for the terrorist organization like Tliban, Al-kaida and many other smaller terrorist outfits operating from Pakistani soil. It is also a fact that Pakistan is regularly sponsoring terrorists and sending them to Indian side from across the border. In spite of all this, India will have to tread very cautiously and try to resolve all these issue amicably through dialogues or diplomatic engagements from both the sides.

- Over the period, Pakistan seems to have become strategically more relevant and important for Russia than India because of four principal reasons, i.e. (1) Russia is looking for another market for its weapons. (2) it would be snatching a US ally to its side. (3) Pakistan is a sub-set of its China exposure. (4) it has swallowed the Pakistani pup that ISIS is the real or more formidable threat in Afghanistan than Taliban.
- Pakistan has been regularly instigating Indian side to retaliate and carry out counter-strikes or surgical strikes. But with a view to maintain the peace in the region both the sides (having nuclear weapons), need to resist themselves and ensure that the situation does never come to a pass and get escalated to a full scale war. Indian side need to understand and realize that in the event of a full scale war with Pakistan, US may or may not come to our rescue. But, but on the other side, the China, which has invested a whopping 50 billion USD in Pakistan in CPEC Project and Russia (has merged its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC) would never allow Indian side to inflict a damage to Pakistani side. Both, Russia and China would definitely join hands to defend Pakistan, if not directly attacking Indian side.
- In view of the above, it remains to be seen as to what extend these super-powers (China and Russia) will economically exploit Pakistan and its resources and what all price, the Pakistan will have to pay for these associations, but India has no other choice but to diversify its relationships to the extent possible. If US is indeed a stronger friend of India, the latter should lobby more forcefully with Washington. As US may not turn out to be as reliable friend to India as Russia and China are to Pakistan, India also needs to do some balancing acts and find a way to repair its relationship with Russia and China as well. So long as the China continue with its hostile attitude towards India, the latter will not be able to have any bill passed in the UN against Pakistan or will not allow India to become the member of Nuclear Suppliers Group, as every time the proposal comes up for approval in UN it would be opposed and vetoed by China.

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