

## CHINA-RUSSIA-PAKISTAN STRATEGIC NEXUS: A BEGINNING OF NEW GEOPOLITICAL GREAT GAME IN SOUTH ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

*China's bilateral relations with Russia can be traced back to the Cold War period wherein various ups and downs were seen in the mutual partnership. On the other hand, branded as an all-weather friendship, Sino-Pak strategic and diplomatic bond has always seen significant gains. Since, both China and Russia are antagonists of the US existence in their immediate neighborhood and, hence, the rising Indo-US strategic partnership has compelled them to get strongly knotted into an unbreakable bond. In this fashion, a paradigmatic shift in Russia-Pak relations was witnessed after the duo strategically came closer to each other. In other words, a new triple alliance in the form of China-Russia-Pakistan has been in offing. Consequently, the main target of the imminent triple alliance would be none another but to counter the rising Indo-US strategic maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific region in general and South Asia in particular. Hence, the main focus of this study would be on analyzing the formation of the triple alliance and its consequences on both Indo-US ties as well as the regional security order.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Great Game, Triple Alliance, South Asia, Indo-US Strategic Bond, China-Pakistan All-Weather Friendship, Russia-China Rapprochement*

### INTRODUCTION

Both China and Russia had established friendly relations with each other prior to the Cold War period. During the initial phase of the Cold War, China had sided with the USSR for the reason of anti-communist ideology by the US. Accordingly, both China and the USSR aligned with each other against the Western bloc and mutually participated in many anti-US campaigns like Korean War etc. However, the Sino-Soviet bond did not lose longer and finally started declining during the later phase of the 1950's. Many reasons were held responsible for the declining Sino-Soviet partnership like the role of USSR in Tibet crisis, Cuban missile crisis, Soviet support to India during 1962 Sino-India war etc. Therefore, the Sino-Soviet Cold War partnership did not yield desired fruitful results and finally ended at the beginning of the 1960s.

After the fall, of the Soviet Union in 1991, China's alignment with the US also weakened and, this paved ways for the beginning of Sino-Russia rapprochement. Within a short span of time, both China and Russia have signed strategic partnership agreements, and in the year 2001 a landmark treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The recent reciprocated

higher official visits from both the sides have added a new dimension in Sino-Russia bilateralism. Both the countries are sharing close contacts with each other through militarily, economically, politically and cultural aspects. Russia and China are staunch supporters of each other at various regional and global for a. Russia is supporting China's stand on the volatile maritime issue of South China Sea. China has been also backing various actions and reactions by Russia not only in its own vicinity rather globally like in the Middle East. In fact, China and Russia have had close contacts and despite many hiccups during the Cold War, the bilateral relationship based on mutual trust is gaining significant grounds.

The world has been observing the effective completion of more than six and a half decades of Sino-Pak friendship. Amongst the Muslim world, Pakistan became the first country that recognized the People's Republic of China and, afterward, established diplomatic ties. Until now, the Sino-Pak bilateralism has been passing through the golden ages and, also, has been anticipated to gain further momentum with the passage of time. The bilateral relationship has gained more than the desired objectives through the frequent bilateral higher official visits. On one hand, China has been considering Pakistan as a geostrategically vital nation to safeguard its own diverse economic and political interests. On the other hand, the energy-hungry China owns a strong foothold in the resource loaded Central Asian Republics (CARs) of which Pakistan is considered a gateway. In recent times, China speeded up its various economic and other developmental programs both in Pakistan and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). These economic projects have laid a positive impact on the overall development of Pakistan. The geo economically significant Gwadar Port in Pakistan has been controlled by China. The port forms the beginning of connecting landlocked region of Central Asia with the maritime trade routes. Apart from economic development, the positive role by China in the process of military modernization of Pakistan cannot be undermined. In other words, both China and Pakistan are interdependent on each other for their various policies and programs.

Under the emerging geopolitical great game in South Asia, Russia's recent strategic and diplomatic intimacy with Pakistan has added a new chapter in South Asian regional security matrix. The recent defense deals and other diplomatic initiatives have strengthened the Russia-Pak mutual bond. Earlier, Russia was not considering Pakistan a vital player in the regional affairs. However, in the recent times, Russia has started to recognize the geostrategic vitality of Pakistan in maintaining regional peace which has been a prerequisite for bringing inclusive development. Therefore, Russia has expanded its hand of friendship with Pakistan and, thereby, created speculations about the formation of a possible triple alliance (Russia-China-Pakistan).

Under the new security order in the South Asian region, the vital role by the big brother India to put a check on Sino-Pak maneuvers has been of vital importance. The Sino-India bilateral relations have/had been shrouded in various conflicts particularly the mutual border disputes. Further, the struggle for gaining power status as well as economic competition amongst India and China has contributed significantly to their waning bilateralism. On one hand, both the rising Asian economic powers, India and China have been considered as the vital players in realizing the dream of the Asian Century. On the other hand, the continued Sino-India rivalry has been measured a negative attribute in the successful path of the Asian Century. In the post-Indo-US civil nuclear deal period, India's extra tilt towards the West has agonized China the most. Further, China has been attempting to gain the full-fledged membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to check and balance the Indian hegemony in the regional forum. Moreover, Obama's

'Asia Pivot'<sup>1</sup> policy and China's 'String of Pearls'<sup>2</sup> have created a more complex situation for the regional countries to get themselves well-adjusted in the emerging power balancing equations. In this regard, the formation of a triple axis flanked by three strong nuclear powers China, Russia and Pakistan might pose a significant challenge to the US domination. Hence, a new situation rather a new security order has emerged in South Asia where the regional, as well as extra-regional powers, are busy in containing each other through various moves and counter moves.

### **Formation of a New Triple Alliance: Russia-China-Pakistan**

As stated earlier that during the initial phase of the Cold War, the Sino-Soviet prolific alliance had played a significant role in the military modernization program of China. In other words, it is often said that Russia was the chief architect of China's military development. After forgetting about the Cold War animosity, both China and Russia have laid a new foundation of wide-ranging diplomatic, economic and strategic networks immediately after the fall of Soviet Union in 1991. Accordingly, the Post-Cold War period witnessed the signing of two landmark agreements between Russia and China like a strategic partnership in 1996 and the treaty of friendship and cooperation in 2001 (Thoker & Singh, 2017: 61-83). Similarly, the Sino-Russo bilateralism witnessed an upward thrust with reciprocated higher official visits. In this regard, Chinese premier Xi Jinping visited Russia in 2013. This trip has opened new gateways for increasing confidence-building measures (Kumar, 2016). In reality, the Russia-China bilateralism was off the radar from the world observation until both have decided to back and support each other at both regional and global levels.

Russia has been supporting China's stand on the South China Sea dispute. Although, China was criticised globally for not following the verdict by the International Tribunal on 12 July 2016. However, Russia remained a firm supporter of China's view on the verdict. Moreover, the joint military drills by China and Russia in the disputed territory of the South China Sea has been a clear indication of growing Sino-Russo mutual cooperation (Lendon & Hunt, 2016). In fact, the primary reason behind the evolving Sino-Russo mutual trust has been to counter various actions and reactions by the US in the region.

It has been a matter of fact that Pakistan was tilted more towards the Western bloc during the Cold War period. Hence, Russia was hostile to Pakistan's tilt towards the US and, therefore, the bilateral relations could not be flourished. In addition, the Pak support to Mujahideen during Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) has further agonized Russia. In other words, it can be rightly said that both Russia and Pakistan were unfriendly to each other during the entire course of the Cold War. However, a dramatic change occurred in the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan in the post-Cold War period particularly after 2013. Here the main question arises about that what was the primary reason behind the improved Russia-Pak bilateral relations. In this regard, the main reason seems one and the only the emerging Indo-US entente (Kaura, 2018: 58-79). Actually, both China and Russia have been against the increased role and existence of the US in their respective vicinities. Furthermore, Pakistan has been also considering the rising Indo-US maneuvers in the region as against its interests. Therefore, the common agenda amongst Russia and Pakistan has made them close friends.

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<sup>1</sup> The US policy announced by Hillary Clinton in 2011 forms a part of its rebalancing strategy to check the rise and hegemony of China through enhancing military and strategic cooperation with the active members of Asian countries.

<sup>2</sup> The China's geopolitical theory about military and commercial activities in the Indian Ocean which stretches from the mainland of China up to Port Sudan.

In order to boost economic cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, both have signed a multi-dollar deal worth US\$ 2 billion North-South Gas pipeline on 16 October 2015.<sup>3</sup> The gas pipeline will run from between Lahore and Karachi. So far as the question regarding the bilateral strategic collaboration is concerned, Russia and Pakistan have signed an agreement on 19 August 2015 through which Russia has decided to sell Mi-35 'Hind-E' attack helicopters to Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Russia in the recent times has started to provide every kind of diplomatic support to Pakistan. There are speculations that Pakistan has also cleared the path to welcome Russia into a strategically vital Gwadar Port. The most striking aspect in the evolving Russia-Pak bilateralism was witnessed in September 2016 after both the states have conducted the first-ever joint military exercise.<sup>5</sup> Although, Russia was asked by its longstanding Cold War ally India to cancel its proposed military drills with Pakistan. However, Russia's denial of India's proposal has clearly indicated Moscow's keen interest to strengthen bilateral relations with Pakistan (Ramani, 2018). In fact, it can be well stated here that Russia-Pak friendship has started with great passion and, therefore, owns major scope to gain further heights.

Sino-Pak all-weather friendship has been gaining significant heights with every passing year given China's large-scale economic, strategic and diplomatic support to Pakistan. China has been the largest supplier of arms and ammunition to Pakistan. China and Pakistan have signed various landmark strategic agreements including joint military exercises and has provided other military services to Pak army (Thoker and Singh, 2018: 50-64). In fact, China has played a significant role in modernizing Pakistan army. In addition to strategic collaboration, China also considers Pakistan as geo-economically vital in realizing various economic initiatives of Beijing like the intercontinental connectivity project of One Belt One Road (OBOR). The much-awaited China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become partly operational on 13 November 2016 after a Chinese cargo was transported to Gwadar Port (Pande, 2015). Additionally, China has had been very active in various regions of Pakistan through building nuclear reactors, making roads, constructing ports, military bases and various other mega projects.

Formerly, Russia had a negative perception about Pakistan's role in the regional security order. However, Russia has now changed its attitude and has started realizing the significant role by Pakistan in promoting regional security and stability. More importantly, after the US-led war on terror policy, Pakistan has been considered as the frontline state which highlights the geostrategic role of Islamabad both at the regional and global levels. Furthermore, the role and policies of newly elected 45<sup>th</sup> US President Donald Trump would be worth mentioning for his antagonistic attitude vis-à-vis Russia, China and Pakistan (Ahmed and Singh, 2017: 133-146). All the three nuclear powers have started to support each other against any US policy acting contrary to their respective interests. Both Russia and China stand up with Pakistan after the latter was severely criticised for its inactive role in combating terrorism by Donald Trump through his new Afghan Policy (21 August 2017). In other words, the US owns a big role in the changing security order in South Asia amidst the formation of the triple alliance.

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<sup>3</sup> Pakistan, Russia sign agreement for construction of North-South gas pipeline, *The Dawn*. Accessed on December 23, 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>.

<sup>4</sup> Pakistan, Russia sign landmark defence deal, *The Dawn*. Accessed on January 4, 2017. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>.

<sup>5</sup> Deep military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan threatens Delhi, *Russia Direct*. Accessed on January 2, 2017. <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/deep-military-cooperation-between-russia-and-pakistan-threatens-delhi>.

China, Russia, and Pakistan with around 7620 nuclear warheads might potentially challenge the US hegemony in the region. As formerly stated, China is supporting/backing various strategic and diplomatic moves by Russia at both regional and global levels (Naik and Ahmad, 2017). Pakistan has been also supporting every kind of strategic, diplomatic and economic moves both within South Asia and beyond. Similarly, China is also acting as a guardian to Pakistan at various crucial junctures particularly against various strategic moves by India. Indeed, the triple alliance would continue to expand their circle of influence until the US has been strategically active in the region (Yang, 2016). Moreover, Russia's leadership under Vladimir Putin and China under the dynamic leadership of Xi Jinping are attempting to explore their economic and strategic potential across the globe. The return of democratic setup in Pakistan after General Pervez Musharraf surrendered his power in 2008 has been a positive sign for the inclusive development of the country. In short, all the three powers, China-Russia and Pakistan are aligning with each other in diverse fields (Aziz, 2017). In this way, a powerful nuclear bloc has been in the offing that might significantly challenge the Indo-US maneuvers in the region.

To conclude it can be rightly said at this juncture that both Russia and Pakistan anticipates China to play a central role in converting the initial phase of triple entente into a developed one. Moreover, in case the triple alliance gets solidified, it might challenge various US initiatives as well as its allies and supporters in the region. Therefore, the region of South Asia has been under the shadow of power politics game amongst the US, China, Russia, India, and Pakistan.

### **AN EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL GREAT GAME IN SOUTH ASIA**

There are many reasons held responsible for the rising South Asian geopolitics which primarily includes India-Pakistan rivalry and the nuclear arms race, Sino-Pak all-weather friendship, emerging China-Russia-Pakistan triple axis, rising Indo-US bond, Afghanistan problem, major power competition for energy resources in Central Asia, and many others. Since China has been sharing its borders with the majority of the South Asian countries, and, therefore, it considers itself as a key player in the regional power politics (Naseer and Amin, 2015). Slowly but surely, China has emerged as an indestructible comrade of Pakistan, mainly after the Sino-India war of 1962. Both China and Pakistan treat India as their common enemy and, for that reason, any significant move from New Delhi is not only challenged rather Beijing utilizes Islamabad to counter that in an effective manner. Since their independence, the enduring Indo-Pak rivalry and hatred have led to the outbreak of three major wars between them. The main reason for the continued Indo-Pak rivalry remains unresolved Kashmir dispute. Both India and Pakistan are well aware of fact that the regional peace has been a prerequisite for not only their own developments rather the entire region as well. However, the unresolved Kashmir dispute has enhanced arms race and both the South Asian partners, India and Pakistan, are attempting to acquire more and more sophisticated weaponry with the intention to provide a significant challenge to each other (Paul, 2005). In a nutshell, due to unsettled Kashmir dispute, both India and Pakistan have suffered heavily in the form of deaths, huge property losses and many more.

The two significant South Asian military powers, India and Pakistan have successfully conducted nuclear tests in 1998. The incident has put the entire region on the verge of nuclear race and, thus, any war in future would lead to massive destruction of the sub-continent. Moreover, the other South Asian players have also started to think in terms of strong defense capabilities to better safeguard their territories against any possible threat. It has been alleged that China supported fully in making Pakistan a nuclear-capable state to balance India's nuclear potential. China has openly declared that the rising Indo-US ties primarily in the post-civil nuclear deal era, has been an attempt to encircle it. Accordingly, China has

played a vital role in blocking India's membership of Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG). In fact, the Indo-US civil nuclear deal in 2005 has strengthened bilateral relations amongst India and the US. Not only this, as a reaction to the increasing US influences in its vicinity, China knotted strongly with its all-weather friend Pakistan as well as Russia to countervail both India and the US (Haider, 2016). In actual fact, the region is witnessing the formation of alliances and counter-alliances to oppose each other's maneuvers and strategies. Undoubtedly, China is the largest trading partner of India and both the economies are rising unimpededly, hitherto, when it comes to first-rate, the former nepotisms Pakistan against India. The reason seems to be India's extra tilt towards the US and their mutual collaboration in the South China Sea (SCS) against China. Moreover, many border issues and India's inclusive growth has been ostracised by both China and Pakistan and therefore the all-weather friendship is being used to check Indo-US approach towards South and Central Asia (Dar and Ahmad, 2014).

Afghanistan and Central Asia also own significant roles in the rising geopolitics of South Asia. Central Asia is rich in energy resources and Afghanistan being its gateway has captured the global attention and, hence, the region has become a hotbed for major power rivalry. Three major powers often termed as big three (US, China, and Russia) are busy in safeguarding their geostrategic and geo-economic interests in Central Asia. Both Central Asia and Afghanistan have also become a focus of regional players like India and Pakistan. Afghanistan has become a major ground for Indo-Pak proxy wars wherein both try to alienate each other from the geostrategically vital region of Central Asia (Krasnopolsky, 2013). Therefore, a complex situation has arisen in the region whereby Pakistan has emerged as a decisive state for China to comprehend her dream of global power. Sequentially, China's proactive policies have been vital for the inclusive development of Pakistan. The US has many significant issues like curbing terrorism, Talibanisation of Afghanistan, ensuring democratic regimes and several other issues and, therefore, Washington seeks full cooperation from India in accomplishing these goals.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been considered by many analysts as a failure for not improving the regional integration amongst the South Asian nation-states. After India's proactive role in including Afghanistan as a member of SAARC, Pakistan has been attempting to include China as its full-fledged member. On the other hand, India has been against China's inclusion and, hence, the situation has further created a state of geopolitical warfare amongst India and Pakistan. Moreover, the regional forum has been also alleged to be dominated by only two South Asian powers India and Pakistan and rest others possesses only meager roles (Yousaf et. al., 2017)

The emerging New South Asian order, therefore, appears to spin around five main players (US, China, Russia, India, Pakistan,) while others act as their respective allies and supporters. The US, in order to refocus Asia (East and South Asia) and to check and balance the geostrategic rise of China, the former Obama administration has come up with 'Asia Pivot' policy. Under the Asia Pivot policy, the US has strengthened military and strategic partnership with the significant Asian countries like Japan and Philippines by placing their air and naval foothold to engage the emerging power China (Jahangir, 2013: 50-58). As a result, China also reinforced its position by prioritizing South and East Asia in its foreign policy through various enhanced economic and strategic initiatives. In fact, the Indo-Pacific region has been turning into the battlefield given enhanced naval and military maneuvers that lead to cascading effects on regional countries mainly in the South Asia (Evans, 2012).



As both Russia and China along with the superpower US have acquired nuclear weapons decades ago. On the other hand, both India and Pakistan have gained the status of nuclear powers around twenty years ago. Under the new emerging power balancing trends in South Asia, these five strong nuclear powers own vital roles. In other words, the triple axis on one side and Indo-US strategic bond on the other, have been maintaining the balance of power in South Asia. More suitably we can say that the Cold War (1947-1991) like the situation has emerged with the formation of alliances and counter-alliances. The US has reshaped its South Asia policy and devoted much significance to India. On the contrary, China and Pakistan relations have been achieving new heights. The inclusion of Russia in the Sino-Pak strategic bond has led to a possible strong triple alliance that might significantly decide the fate of emerging South Asian order. Therefore, under a new South Asian order, wide options exist that might lead either towards regional advancement or obliteration.

## CONCLUSIONS

The history of the Cold War has revealed that many alliances and counter-alliances were formed. Entire Europe had remained a hotbed of major power rivalry between the US and the USSR. The South Asian region was no longer remote to major power rivalry. No doubt the South Asian region was majorly a follower of non-alignment policy. However, two major powers, India and Pakistan after their independence had shown an extra tilt towards either group. Similarly, India was strategically more inclined towards the communist group and, on the other hand, Pakistan with a Capitalist one led by the US. Afterward, the end of Cold War in 1991 has changed the entire geopolitical matrix of the globe. The change of the bipolar world into a unipolar one has brought in many changes in the foreign policy objectives of almost all the countries across the globe.

In the present context, the economic rise of China, India and several other powers has led many global analysts to think in terms of the multipolar world. More recently, the Russian Federation has also made a considerable appearance on the global forefront. Since, both China and Russia have/had been critiques of the extended US influences both at the regional and global levels. Similarly, the Indo-US civil nuclear deal of 2005 proved to be a turning point in the changing regional order in South Asia. Both China and Russia along with Pakistan have started opposing the rising Indo-US influences in the region and, further, the trio has also decided to come closer to each other.

The formation of a triple alliance involving China, Russia, and Pakistan seem imminent in South Asia. Russia has categorically changed its previous hard stance against Pakistan and has started to enhance strategic proximity with Islamabad. Similarly, the Sino-Russia rapprochement in strategic and economic fields has gained new grounds of successes. The trio has been supportive of each other's diverse strategic moves which have become evident at many occasions wherein they have openly supported each other. In fact, a strong nuclear power bloc might be formed provided the embryonic stage of triple alliance gets further developed.

Now the question arises here about the possible consequences of the formation of triple alliance on the emerging South Asian geopolitical scenario. In this regard, as mentioned earlier, the main target of the triple axis is the rising Indo-US strategic, economic and diplomatic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific in general and South Asia in particular. Therefore, a Cold War-like situation has arisen in South Asia where the formation of alliances has taken place. The persisting Indo-Pak rivalry, Sino-India border and maritime disputes, the rising genomic significance of Central Asia, the geostrategic vitality of Afghanistan for the regional peace, competition and confrontation amongst the US,

China and Russia, failure of SAARC, Indo-Pak membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and many other factors would decide the fate of emerging geopolitical great game in South Asia.

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