

# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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## RUSSIA AND PAKISTAN: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS



**Brig Deepak Mehra, KC, VSM** is an alumnus of National Defence Academy and was commissioned in 5 Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) in 1987. He has served in Embassy of India, Moscow as Military Attache and is presently posted in HQ IDS.

*'I don't see an opportunity to equalise relations between Russia and Pakistan and Russia and India. Our partnership with India is second to no one. We have normal interstate relations with Pakistan'.*

Nikolay Kudashev, Russian  
Ambassador to India

### Introduction

1. Over last about 70 years Indo-Russian Friendship has stood the test of time. This friendship between the two Nations is based on the solid foundations of the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the Republic of India and the USSR, 1993 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation

between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation, 2000 Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation and 2010 Joint Statement elevating the Partnership to a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership<sup>1</sup>. The unique meeting between Modi and Putin in Sochi, Russia in May 2018, reaffirmed the commitment to the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership between India and Russia. Over the years both the countries have stood by each other during the times of need and Russia ranks very high in India's world view.

<sup>1</sup> <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=183982> accessed on 23 Feb 2019



2. Post 2001, rapidly changing Geo-Political landscape witnessed; US embroiled in two wars thousands of Km away; China consolidating its hold on economy and furiously building its defence industry and; Russia under Putin, emerging from the lost decade of 90's. India too, during these years, endeavoured to balance out its Defence dependence between Russia and the West. Signing of Indo-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2006 was, as per most of the International relations observers and scholars, a clear tilt by India towards US which had implications on the equation between India and Russia. Post ratification of the Civil Nuclear Agreement in Oct 2008 and growing defence relationship between India and the US, some dissonance between India and Russia appeared. Russia's share in the overall Defence Equipment import by India progressively declined although, in absolute terms, Russia remained the largest supplier of defence equipment to India. This, coupled with the West's attempted isolation of Russia on the world stage and rising menace of ISIS in Russia's South, necessitated Russia to look out for new avenues of cooperation and fresh partners on the world stage. Russia's emerging relationship with Iran, Syria, Egypt, Turkey and even Pakistan, its one time nemesis in Afghanistan, need to be analysed in this light.

**Is Rapidly Transforming Geo-Political Landscape acting as a Catalyst to Russia-Pakistan Convergence**

3. Geography has placed Pakistan in a unique position. Pakistan straddles the cross roads linking; Europe with Asia; hydrocarbon rich West Asia to energy deficient South Asia and; land locked Central Asian countries

to the warm waters of Indian Ocean. At different times in history, Pakistan has witnessed the intervention of great powers viz, Britain, USSR and US. In the present milieu, emerging Chinese powered BRI infrastructure linking, Europe and West Asia to South and South East Asia, once again makes Pakistan indispensable to another rising power, China. Russia with its Western alignment blocked by the confrontationalist West, finds an alternative through these emerging economic infrastructure linkages to connect with the vast markets of South Asia and an access to the Indian Ocean.

4. Pakistan, since Independence has been a close ally of USA. On the eve of Russian intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan willingly acted as an American conduit, supplying Stingers to Mujahedins that bled USSR and forced them to withdraw. Post withdrawal, Pakistan continued to support these Jihadis in various roles viz in Afghanistan, as Taliban to gain control and retain depth; in India, rebooting them to fight in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India and; in some other countries of South Asia and South East Asia. Post 9/11, an ultimatum from USA saw Pakistan once again falling in line to become partner of the US in its new war against Islamist terrorist groups in Afghanistan. However, deep state within Pakistan had different designs! Much to the chagrin of US, Pakistan continued to distinguish terrorists as good or bad, depending on their utility to Pakistan's nefarious designs and covertly supported those who remained sympathetic or neutral in their approach to the Pakistani state. Each attempt of drawdown of forces by the US saw fresh resurgence of violence and emergence of new groups, including ISIS in the form of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K). Finally, as US started levying costs on

Pakistan for policies that help perpetuate terrorism in the region, Pakistan started looking for new paramours. In times to come, with decreasing US military aid to Pakistan, Pakistani leaders will seek to strengthen ties with traditional allies like China and Saudi Arabia and also explore new partnerships, as with Russia<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Russia's US defying successful campaign in Syria and Russia-China bonhomie, has polarised the World and given rise to the 'New Cold War'. It is therefore, natural that, the World will witness new stand offs, fresh challenges and of course, new alliances and emerging friendships.

5. Creeping by NATO to the East and resultant reaction of resurgent Russia in Ukraine and Crimea, has lead to sanctions by the West on Russia. With its economy so well entwined with that of Europe, sanctions by the West have hurt Russia in more ways than one. Russia, to survive, had to look for new avenues and reduce its dependence on the West. It is a well known fact that the present century belongs to Asia with India as one of its brightest stars. The idea of a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Union (EAU) and India in consonance with the planned North-South Transport Corridor between Russia and India via Iran and Azerbaijan and even Russian support to China's BRI and consequent utility of Pakistan to Russia, needs be viewed from this aspect.

6. Russia, over the years has been able to contain insurgency in its restive areas of caucasus however, rise of ISIS in Syria and

Northern Afghanistan and presence of large number of Russians from North Caucasus in their rank and file, poses new challenges. Russia has been trying to develop leverages against this new threat by increasing its interactions with Taliban. In fact, it is Pakistan's leverage with Taliban that has been one of the main drivers of Moscow's outreach to Islamabad<sup>3</sup>. Various initiatives on Afghanistan undertaken by Russia with Pakistan's support and exclusion of India, has given confidence to Pakistan that, Russia cannot do without them in Afghanistan. Also, Pakistan has been utilizing each of the interactions with Russian officials to project itself as a victim of terrorism and appears to be reasonably successful in influencing Russian mind towards accepting it.

7. NATO, post the break up of Soviet Union has added 12 (now 13 with Montenegro) additional members since the dissolution of its onetime greatest threat and rival<sup>4</sup>, WARSAW. This has brought NATO to the Russia's Western borders. On the Eastern side of the Russian landmass, increasingly belligerent Chinese actions in East and South East Asia, have strained the relations between the US and China. Thus, as Viktor Litovkin, head of TASS military news editorial office commented in the wake of EX-VOSTOK 2018 (in which Russia, China and Mongolia participated) "*The drills will show that out of necessity, Russia and China can join forces against a third, powerful state which strives for global hegemony.*" In this marriage of

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hudson.org/research/13305-a-new-u-s-approach-to-pakistan-enforcing-aid-conditions-without-cutting-ties> accessed on 19 Feb 2019

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnr\\_23\\_stepanova\\_russia\\_afpak\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rnr_23_stepanova_russia_afpak_2018.pdf) accessed on 21 Feb 2019

<sup>4</sup> <https://sputniknews.com/military/201612221048859350-nato-russia-threat/> accessed on 23 Feb 2019



convenience between China and Russia, Pakistan, due to its geographical construct and deteriorating relation with the West, finds itself in the sweet spot.

8. Increasing Russian bonhomie with Pakistan could also be seen in the light of India's expanding defence procurement base with the bias towards the US, post 2006. Meanwhile, Russia too has been trying to expand its defence exports to new countries, including Pakistan. Energy starved Pakistan is also a huge market for the Russian oil and gas exports through CAR and Afghanistan or through INSTC route via Iran.

9. China : An Elephant in the Room. China, which is a traditional ally of Pakistan play a vital role in Russia – Pakistan relations. For China, Pakistan is a critical piece in the jig saw puzzle of the 'Chinese Dream'. In Chinese scheme of things; successful rolling out of BRI (CPEC in particular), operationalising of Gwadar, market for Chinese weapons, control internal disturbances in the province of Xinjiang or in providing shortest link to the warm waters of Indian Ocean; role of Pakistan remains central. It is opined that, any interaction between Russia and Pakistan has the tacit backing of China and possibly China is playing a role in gently nudging Russia to open up to Pakistan. Also, in the current scenario Russia, China and Pakistan, are on the receiving end of the American stick on one pretext or the other. It is therefore, natural for these countries to bind together for the foreseeable future.

### **Current Status of Russia Pakistan Convergence**

10. Warming up of Russia-Pakistan ties is a relatively recent phenomenon<sup>5</sup> however, a tilt in Russian foreign policy towards Pakistan has been visible for some time, with Islamabad making concerted efforts to build strong ties with Moscow. The thaw in relations between the two countries commenced in the year 2007, with the visit of Russian Prime Minister to Pakistan after a gap of 38 years. Incidentally, this almost coincided with the signing of Indo-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement in 2006. By the year 2014 US arms exports to India had increased manifold and the same year witnessed Russian Defence Minister and the three Russian Service Chiefs making beeline for Pakistan. In the course of these visits, bilateral defence cooperation agreement between Russia and Pakistan was signed followed by another 'Technical Cooperation Agreement' thus, laying foundation for the enhanced Defence Cooperation between the two countries.

11. Soon, another landmark was crossed when, for the first time ever, Russia and Pakistan signed a formal agreement for the sale of four MI-35 helicopters to Pakistan. This was followed by sale of other military hardware, participating in strength in each other's defence expositions and signing of an agreement between the two countries for the training of Pakistan Armed Forces personnel in Russia. The author witnessed this phase of growing bonhomie from close quarters in

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.algemeiner.com/2018/09/03/russias-deadly-embrace-of-pakistan-will-harm-the-us-and-india/> accessed on 21 Jan 2019

Moscow where, Pakistan was seen bending backwards to please Russia. This phase coincided with the times when West had embarked upon imposing ever tightening sanctions against Russia and the Syrian operations were in a delicate phase. Russia at that time was in desperate need of friends who could stand with Russia shoulder to shoulder on the World stage. And Pakistan, with its deteriorating relationship with the West, provided that support.

12. Meanwhile, the high level exchanges, which commenced in the year 2007, continued with the exchange of visits by Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Service Chiefs and senior hierarchy from Pakistan defence establishments visiting Russia multiple times each year. Steadily, the level of trust between the two Armed Forces strengthened and soon, another rubicon was crossed when, Land Forces Commander of Russia, in Jan of 2016, announced the conduct of first ever Land Forces Exercise between Russian and Pakistan Armies. This exercise has since then become an annual feature with the third edition of Ex DRUZBA-2018 conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan in Oct 2018. Apart from Army Exercise, Pakistan has been engaging Russian Navy in multi Nation Naval Exercise since 2014 under the name ARABIAN MONSOON.

13. Out right purchase of some equipment from the Russian stable by the Pakistani establishment slowly but intermittently increased leading to talks about joint ventures or Transfer of technology from Russia to Pakistan for Klashnikov Rifles, tank ammunitions and some other equipment. Pakistan has, off late also shown interest in some high end Russian platforms to include S-400, additional Mi-35 Helicopters, SU-35 Fighter Aircrafts, T-90 Tanks and even in the field of Nuclear cooperation where, Pakistan's role in proliferation is rather doubtful.

14. In the field of trade and commerce and people to people relations, efforts are presently on from both the sides to increase the engagements. A deal concluded in 2015 includes the construction of 1,100 kilometre of gas pipeline with a capacity of 12.4 billion cubic meter per annum connecting Karachi's liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals with those in Lahore<sup>6</sup>. In Feb 2019 agreement between Russian state owned Gazprom with Pakistan's Inter State Gas Systems Limited (ISGSL) was signed for the offshore oil and gas exploration activities, besides installation of a pipeline which would supply gas to Pakistan from the Middle East through the sea-link<sup>7</sup>. Pakistan has been keen to explore Russian markets and establish a foothold following vacuum created by the departure of European companies. Business council for cooperation with Pakistan under the Chamber of Commerce of Russian Federation, has been working actively to achieve it.

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6 <http://tass.com/economy/1002160> accessed on 23 Jan 2019

7 [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/06/c\\_137803155](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-02/06/c_137803155) accessed on 02 Mar 2019



15. As the war on terror in Afghanistan continues and US looking for an honourable exit, China, Pakistan and Russia are inching closer to bring stability in war-torn Afghanistan. Russia especially, see this as an opportunity to get back to US and force him out of this unwinnable war as, US did to USSR 30 years back. And once again, Pakistan finds itself in the central role. With its deep state nurturing and retaining control over various terrorist organisations, Pakistan is indispensable to Russia in 'Affairs Afghanistan'. For the foreseeable future this one factor will continue to inspire Moscow to keep Pakistan on its right side.

16. On the diplomatic front too, a thaw in the relations between the two countries has been noticed. To India's dismay, in Paris in Feb of 2018, Pakistan with the help of Russia and two other countries, escaped the consequences of its support to terrorist organisations at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) meeting and secured a last-minute reprieve and avoided being put back on a global list of countries that finance terrorism<sup>8</sup>. Also, recent interactions between the Security Council of Pakistan and Presidential Administration of Russia, exchanges at various levels in the field of trade and commerce and Russia opening an honorary counsel office in Peshawar, do point to deeper interactions in the times to come.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/pakistan-saved-from-fatf-terrorist-finance-list-did-russia-let-india-down-118022100198\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/pakistan-saved-from-fatf-terrorist-finance-list-did-russia-let-india-down-118022100198_1.html) accessed on 23 Dec 2018

### Prognosis

17. It is felt that, keeping the long term Geo Political interests of Russia and diversification of its economy in view, the positive trajectory of Russia's engagement with Pakistan may continue in the foreseeable future. However, one need not look at Russia-Pakistan emerging relationship and Russia-India bonding, as a zero sum game. Russia's engagement with Pakistan is essentially based on ending the United States' long-standing military intervention in Afghanistan<sup>9</sup> and Russia's desire to keep ISIS activities in Afghanistan under check. To that end, in the present circumstances, Pakistan has utility for Russia. Indo-Russian engagement on the other hand, is multifaceted based on trust and support for each other over last seventy years.

18. Pakistan is in a precarious financial situation seeking financial bailouts from various agencies and countries. Till now China has supported Pakistan by providing bailouts and standing by its ally in various World Forums. It is difficult to fathom the extent to which China will continue to compensate Pakistan for its financial follies and support to terrorism. And as far as Russia is concerned, with ever tightening US led sanctions it may not be in a position to provide any major financial succour to Pakistan or hope for any major investments into the Russian economy.

<sup>9</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/russia-and-pakistan-a-durable-anti-american-alliance-in-south-asia/> accessed on 02 Mar 2019

19. As Indian economic elephant gathers pace, the relationship between India and Russia is transcending to that of equal partners investing in each others progress. If India seeks cutting edge technology in the field of defence from Russia, then there is Russia, which is looking for long term investments from Indian firms in Russian ventures. In 2017, Indian consortium comprising various Indian state-owned oil and gas majors bought a 23.9 percent stake in Vankorneft, a subsidiary of Rosneft, as well as a 29.9 percent interest in Taas-Yuryakh Neftegazodobycha, which operates the gigantic Srednebotuobinskoye oil field. Taken together, Indian investment in Russia's strategic oil and gas sector now totals more than USD10 billion. Similarly Indian acquisitions of the Russian coal mines in the far east, Russian construction of Kundankulam Nuclear plants in India, Indian investments in establishing diamond polishing units in Russia or various joint ventures in the field of Defence, are just some of the examples of Indo-Russian convergence of interests that have helped balance the influence of the Chinese in Russia's upstream sectors and served to highlight India's continuing geo strategic relevance to Moscow<sup>10</sup>. It is doubtful that Russia would like to jeopardise this emerging relationship with India by aligning itself with one of the *economically worst performing* countries of the world.

20. On the issue of supply of defence equipment to Pakistan, Russia is unlikely to emerge as a source of foreign aid to Pakistan, in the manner that the US has been. Unlike the days of the erstwhile USSR, there are NO 'subsidies' or 'friendship prices' anymore. Pakistan is scrounging for loans to repay the earlier loans. With IMF reluctant to provide Pakistan its twelfth bail out package, prospects of any major defence deals in the foreseeable future between Russia and Pakistan remains grim. On the other hand for Russia, India remains a reliable market for its high end defence products and an opportunity to partner in India's quest for Make in India. However, for the present, a probable 'nudge' from China and Pakistan's favorable geo-political location, coupled with its impending divorce from the US, seem to have contributed to its increased significance in the Russian strategic calculus.

21. On the diplomatic front, recent statements on mediation by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, during the Indo-Pakistan stand off, have been received with some disquiet in New Delhi, as it denotes an attempt at balancing between Pakistan's demand for international intervention and India's demand for Pakistan to act against terrorist groups<sup>11</sup>. For India, Moscow's pronouncement by its foreign minister was uncalled for. In the current international environment, India

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10 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/the-india-russia-us-energy-triangle/> accessed on 19 Jan 2019

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11 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-pakistan-tensions-no-russian-mediation-required-situation-is-stabilizing-says-india/article26419301.ece> accessed on 18 Mar 2019



understands the convergence of Russian and Pakistan views for geopolitical gains however, it would not like Russia to do what it has never attempted to do. Rather, as Indian Ambassador to Russia, when asked what India expects Russia to do said *“In our opinion, the role of Russia may also consist in influencing Pakistan so that it does not allow terrorist groups to use its territory.”*. Russia may also guard against providing platforms and opportunities to Pakistan to carry on its oft repeated tirade against India.

22. In the normal circumstances, the progress in Russia-Pakistan relationship would have been a gradual process. However, with the impending withdrawal of US led Forces from Afghanistan, this relationship may get a fillip, as Russia will have to lean on Pakistan to control the spread of terror groups up North and create an environment for Russia to avail the benefits of connectivity to the Indian Ocean Region. Growing Russia Pakistan bonhomie could thus, be termed as an environmental reality in today’s age of multi-vectoral relationships. Possibility of this relationship, especially with China’s connivance, being at cross-purposes to India’s long term interests, does loom large and India need to keenly watch it and carry out course correction, where necessary.

### Conclusion

23. India shares a history of close relations with Russia. The cultural ties and the people to people contact between the two nations have been strong. For relationship to reach to the present levels immense effort and time has been spent by both the Nations. However, as Lord Palmerston more than the century ago famously said *‘Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests’*, the relationship between Russia and India today need to be seen from the prism of present day realities. For the relationship to grow, or even sustain at the present levels, both the Nations will have to adjust to the current needs rather than live on the historical legacies. As a growing nation with the economic muscle India is exploring new associations and friendships. Similarly Russia, hounded by the West, is stepping into uncharted waters of multi vectoral relationships vis-vis India. However, in this race for recognition and new affiliations India and Russia must not forget the time tested friendships for the sake of yet to be tested ones.

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## **CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES**

Kashmir House, Rajaji Marg, New Delhi-110 001

**Tel. Nos** : 011-23792446, 23006535, 3306538/9, **Fax** : 011-23792444

**Website** : <http://cenjows.gov.in>, **e-mail** : [cenjows@cenjows.gov.in](mailto:cenjows@cenjows.gov.in)