

# RUSSIAN TILT TOWARDS PAKISTAN AND INDIAN INSECURITIES

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## **Abstract**

*The US intimacy with India has altered the balance of power in South Asia. The series of defence partnership agreements signed between the US and India coupled with the US resentment over CPEC has isolated and distanced Pakistan from the US. Moreover, growing international pressure, constrained and curbed choices along with controlled chaos, and shifting alliances in the region has pushed Pakistan to seek collaboration with Russia. Currently, both states have joined hands under the umbrella of One Belt One Road initiative with the ambition of connecting CPEC with EAEU. The idea of economic integration in the future is cemented by broader military coordination and improvement of people-to-people linkages. Since 2014, Russia officially elevated the ban on selling weapons to Pakistan, revived a joint working group on counterterrorism and international issues, the joint military friendship drills are now also conducted annually. India is not contented with this new substitute in the regional equation. The momentum of improvement in relations between Pakistan and Russia has heightened Indian insecurities. The multi-vector Russian policy and its tilt towards Pakistan can compromise and endanger Indian interests regionally and internationally. This paper attempts to comprehend the nature of Indian insecurities in the backdrop of the emerging Russian-Pakistan nexus.*

**Keywords:** Russia, Pakistan, China, India, Nexus, South Asia.

## **Introduction**

**T**he shift in the global power paradigm is becoming more obvious with time. Emerging powers are seeking economic and political allies to grow together. The possibility of dividing the world into two poles is low as many powers are emerging in each region of the world. The great powers have also revisited and revamped their foreign policies and consider new opportunities. In such a global political environment, countries with great economic and geostrategic importance i.e., India and Pakistan are sought after by the powers. In South Asia, India and Pakistan, have a rivalry that even pushes the two states to join opposite powers in global power dynamics. In recent years, the United States of America has paid exceptional

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attention to India, and their cooperation in all matters of economy and defence multiplied. India welcomed all interests of the USA and cooperated fully with their regional and global plans. However, this raised eyebrows in the Russian Federation, which has enjoyed a partnership of trade and defence with India since the cold war.<sup>1</sup> Indian tilt towards the US has pushed Russia to cooperate with Pakistan that has been eager to expand its foreign relations.

During the Cold War, Pakistan being a state meddling with internal issues and external threats chose to join the US camp. This is now seen as a premature and rather desperate move that entangled Pakistan in further issues, which included Russian disapproval. Thus, Pakistan pushed itself into bloc politics and chose a distant power's support along with a regional power's disfavour, whereas India enjoyed Russian as well as US' support throughout Cold War as a Non-Aligned State.<sup>2</sup> India continued to benefit from these two powers even in the post-cold war era. On the other hand, Pakistan has sought US approval and support throughout the Cold War and after it. Pakistani foreign and defence policy reflected this unrelenting support for the United States in the past. However, the US involvement in Afghan crisis created havoc in Pakistani internal affairs leading to a security crisis. The result was growing anti-American feelings in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan had taken a clear position against the Soviet Union in the Afghan War, Soviet distrust led to an embargo on selling defence equipment to Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> However, in the meantime, Russia found a huge market in India and their relationship became multifaceted ranging from defence to economy.<sup>5</sup> Things changed in 2014, after two years of diplomatic efforts of Pakistan, Russia lifted off its arms embargo on Pakistan. This, of course, was not an out of context move rather Pakistan's increasing geostrategic importance and Indian intimacy with the US has caused Russia to shift its priorities to some extent.

Pakistan has been on a considerably commendable route to growth and development. Pakistan's growth as a significant trade route to Central Asia and connecting entire Eurasia combined with Pakistani political importance in settling Afghan issues has attracted Russian Federation to build good ties with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the US tilt toward India has also pushed Pakistan to seek Russian support and strengthen its existing relationship with China. Pakistan has always struggled to maintain a good relationship with the US, but it has proved unappeasable.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan has struggled to bring and maintain peace and order in the country that got disturbed due to the Afghan War. A history of such cooperation with the US that disturbed Pakistani peace and cost thousands of lives while also putting Pakistani reputation at stake has yet not been enough for the United States to trust Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, recent developments and the

US' interests in India have led to a growing anti-Americanism in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> This gap has also made it possible for the Russian Federation to cooperate with Pakistan and seek a mutually beneficial relationship. On the other hand, Pakistan's relationship continues to worsen with India which continues to support terrorist activities in Balochistan and around Pakistan. Pak-India relations make it clear that their enemies and friends are also a point of deliberation and concern for both states who continually live in paranoia.

In this context, this paper examines Indian apprehensions and their nature considering these shifting paradigms, especially in the wake of growing Pak-Russia relations. The study probes whether these insecurities are economic, defensive, political, or all. The paper also aims to comprehend the possible consequences for Pakistan in the success of the Pak-Russia partnership.

### **Extent of the US-India Partnership**

India and the US alliance is seeing unprecedented growth and success multiplying the cooperation between the two states. India has been benefitting from an expansive defence partnership and the civil nuclear deal with the United States, which was first signed in 2005 and renewed in 2015. This deal was a result of efforts by the conservative Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) led government, later expanded by the Congress government.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, under Modi Regime, the US and India have taken considerable steps in building a healthy relationship that even included Modi's efforts in concluding Paris Agreement for climate change. The real success, however, has been purely bilateral strategic Indo-US partnership for securing the Indo-Pacific region and serving US demands of security in the region of South China Sea.<sup>11</sup> The US also holds multiple regular military exercises with India since the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

Indian economy is projected to become a 5 trillion-dollar economy in the next few decades with a huge growth rate.<sup>13</sup> The US is the biggest importer of India with an import volume of 52.4 billion dollars in 2019.<sup>14</sup> US trade with India has increased exponentially and continues to grow. Moreover, any tensions between India and the USA were further eliminated under Donald Trump's presidency when the USA showed open dissatisfaction with Pakistan, and this impacted US-Pakistan relations. For India, on the contrary, this filled the trust deficit between the two, as US relations with Pakistan remained a point of concern for India. Indian tensions with China and disfavour of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) also played a role in bringing clarity to the US-India partnership. India has also played a pro-US role in Afghanistan, seeking an ally in Afghanistan. The success of India in Afghanistan could also mean the success of the United States, which would safely

withdraw from Afghanistan without losing influence and a strategic partner. This made India one of the most promising geostrategic allies of the United States.

India also made clear that its priority would be the United States, which resulted in Chinese and Russian apprehensions. Bringing a rival power into the region is not acceptable for Russia or China. Russian discomfort over the growing US-India partnerships has resulted in a Russian shift in priorities. Russia has also focused on its redevelopment after the disintegration. The Russian Federation once again senses a global power paradigm shift and aims to garner influence in the region.

### **Shifting Priorities in the Foreign Policy**

Russia has had close ties with India, which includes military and economic cooperation since Cold War. The cooperation of India and Russia extends to defence and economic relations. Bilateral trade between the two states is over 10 billion dollars, while it is a big volume and has seen consistent growth through the years.<sup>15</sup> This is still not the projected and ideal trade volume of 30 billion dollars in 2015 that was expected by the two states;<sup>16</sup> a number that is two times bigger and lags in time. As Indian economic ties with Russia fail to strengthen at the desired rate, their military relationship also suffers due to poor negotiation.

Indian shift in priorities toward the USA is a major cause behind its weakening ties with Russia. There also seems to be a common factor of influence to shape the shift of priorities for India as well as Russia. While India aims to find security in cooperation with the United States because their common enemy and fear is China.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Russia has often depended upon China for securing the region from the USA and plans a greater future together. Russian trade with China exceeds 100 billion dollars, where India is nowhere in the top five countries of bilateral trade with Russia.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Russian defence aims align with China and there is a huge procurement of arms from China.<sup>19</sup> This further fuel the apprehensions of India whose leading fear is a powerful China, and this is probably a cause of declining negotiations between India and Russia.

While Pakistan had a history of anti-Russia foreign policy where only a few attempts were made to improve bilateral relations. Interestingly, each attempt has proven successful and ended in mutually beneficial cooperation.<sup>20</sup> The arms embargo, however, had a valid reason, the Russian trust deficit for Pakistan due to Pakistan's preferences in the past. Russian foreign policy was revised in 2010 when Russia looked more toward east and aimed to support a multipolar world.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan's expanding foreign policy actively sought Russian partnership

and support in the backdrop of growing Indo-US ties. All this led to a change of attitudes in both states toward each other.

Pakistan has started its joint military exercises with Russia; Pakistan also seeks to tap into an advanced arms deal with Russia. Furthermore, a strategic partnership would strengthen Pakistan's place in the region with two major regional powers on its side. Driven by national interests, Pakistan and Russia both explore new dimensions of cooperation. Since 2014, the trajectory of the Pak-Russian relationship has been moving upwards. Russian interests overlap with Pakistani interests in the region and globally, which has powered the defence deals, economic deals, energy sector cooperation, and many other projects between the two states.<sup>22</sup> Russia gave Mi-25 helicopters to Pakistan, which were reportedly used in night operations during Zarb e Azab.<sup>23</sup> The economic ties between the two states have great potential.<sup>24</sup> Russia also offered to build a North-South Gas Pipeline in Pakistan, a much-needed step in Pakistan's energy sector that suffered during the years of terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Russian cooperation with India continues, however, it does not influence Pak-Russia rapprochement. On the contrary, these ties heighten Indian regional security concerns.

Pak-Russia cooperation is developing due to Chinese and Pakistani efforts that began with the Belt and Road Initiative of China. Pakistan plays a significant role as part of the project under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Russia views this opportunity in a positive light since Sino-Russian relationships have been faring better than all others. Russian trade with China, defence deals, and strategic partnerships are excelling, of which Chinese support for Russia in the 2014 Ukrainian Crisis is an example.<sup>26</sup> Russia envisions a greater Eurasia,<sup>27</sup> in its interests and thus supports Chinese economic expansion by connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe via trade routes and advanced infrastructure.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Russian partnership with China on international fora including Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), development banks, and global issues all make it clear that Russia would not discard this fruitful relationship.

Many analysts view Russia's vision of a Greater Eurasia through a critical perspective, however, the treaty on Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), 2014, is a concrete example of Russian vision.<sup>29</sup> While the critiques may suggest that these visions of Russia are bogus or that Russia has historically isolated itself from Asia, the existence of the Eurasian Economic Union tells a different story. Russian inclination to support the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative also suggests Russian aims to expand the Eurasian Economic Union beyond Central Asia and Eastern Europe. These plans also include Pakistan as part of a significant route to Asia, which the Indus has provided since ancient times. Moreover, Afghan Peace takes a renewed meaning in

the region and holds more significance adding the Russian perspective. These foreign policies, plans or visions align with the path taken by Pakistan for its development and foreign policy. Thus, all this making Pakistan an attractive ally for the Russian Federation.

Russia and China enjoy a cooperation worth billions of dollars in the energy sector alone, military armament deals, infrastructure, and investment in banks are other venues of their alignment.<sup>30</sup> It seems that Russia has accepted the multipolar view of the world, and this allows Russia to build effective partnerships with China without fear. However, the US influence on India is a point of concern as the USA has shown open discontent over Russian actions imposing sanctions and showing the least flexibility in policies or rhetoric. Therefore, India's unrelenting and enthusiastic support for the USA in the region has caused Russia to take a step back and make its foreign policy more focused on interests rather than traditional relationships. In fact, academia is also changing perspectives and while the studies about West addressed the 'rising powers' in the past, a couple of decades later, now, the global political studies consider it "more appropriate to speak about managing the decline of the 'old' powers".<sup>31</sup>

Once again putting together the regional perspective, the Russian cordial relationship with Iran may also help Pakistan cultivate more cooperation with Iran. Although, this seems a risk for Pakistan because Pakistan's relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's growing relations and partnerships with India also put Pakistan in a vulnerable position. Pakistan has always shown unrelenting support to Saudi Arabia, however, KSA has shifted its policies from traditional allies to economic-military gains oriented foreign policy. The new world is increasingly realist as the champions of liberal order have failed to uphold liberal values. As liberal values succumb to American interests and the world witnessed many a devastation of governments caused by the USA, Pakistan may revisit its foreign policy toward the USA. This would give Pakistan one more reason to look eastwards.

### **A Glimpse over Indian Insecurities**

The Indian approach to regional politics is dominantly based on US partnership, a patron from a distant land. Whereas the other regional powers have started to look inwards and eastward. India fears becoming isolated in the region as the Russia-Pakistan-China troika is on the rise.<sup>32</sup> India now seeks to have a friendly government in Afghanistan to counter the asymmetry of power and interests created in the region. However, India is not the only state in the region with interests in Afghanistan. Russia has always considered Afghanistan crucial for security and

strategic reasons in Central Asia. In the same, Russia now views Afghan peace as a facilitator and decisive factor in making the Greater Eurasia vision possible. Thus, China, Russia, and Pakistan, together view Afghan peace as crucial for their regional development projects that branch out into the rest of the world. Therefore, Russia revisited its position in Afghan politics and decided to extend relations even to the Taliban, which only remained limited to Northern Alliance in past.<sup>33</sup> This shift, once again is not in the wider Indian interests, pushing the two states a step farther.

Consequently, Indian insecurities also arise from the Russian position on the Afghan issue. India has always viewed Afghanistan as a crucial factor in developing regional influence and used it to constrain its arch-rival, Pakistan. Russian support to Pakistan and their coinciding or close perspectives about regional peace and development pose a threat to India, whereas the position of India and its rhetoric makes it a mouthpiece of the US governments. These issues have negatively influenced the Indo-Russian relationship. Indian growing fears became visible to the world and entered internal Indian debates as well. This eventually led to The Press Trust of India to discuss these fears with Russian Federation's President Putin himself.<sup>34</sup> In the interview, Putin reassured the Indian press that the relationship with Pakistan would not damage Indo-Russian deep cooperation. However, he also addressed that this cooperation does not restrict Russia from collaborating with other partnering countries.<sup>35</sup>

The second reason for Indian insecurities is the Russian position with respect to Chinese power. As elaborated earlier in the paper, the Sino-Russian relationship is unsettling for India. As a state making efforts to become a regional power, Chinese power and growth next door poses a constant threat to Indian security and larger interests. Although, Indian relations with China could be improved through effective negotiation they have not fared well under the Modi government that took a clear pro-US stance. The success of a China-Pakistan-Russia nexus would be greatly detrimental to Indian prospects in the region, while at a global level, US struggles to maintain the balance of power. The question would then become only of maintaining a global balance of power, as this would already make regional power structure asymmetrical.

Thirdly, the presence of Pakistan makes it impossible for India to join the Sino-Russian programmes. Indian politics and foreign relations still based on the principles given by Chanaka Kautilya in Arthashastra: any state that builds ties with Pakistan shrinks its access to relations with India. On the other hand, interest-driven Russia, developmentalism motivated China, and growth-oriented Pakistan frustrated by the United States, now unite in mega projects for mutual gains. Indian insecurities become inevitable in such a regional environment where all big

neighbours unite on an opposing stance. Indian priorities have clearly portrayed American interests, this partnership in its depths and widths surpass the US alliance or assistance with Pakistan. Thus, the world reorienting to realist postulates, poses a different image and a shift in policies.

Another reason for Indian insecurity is Pakistan's expanding sphere of allies in the region, which includes two UN Security Council veto members, which means that Pakistan could also garner support on issues of dispute with India. Pakistani case on Kashmir issue would become stronger and put India in a further crisis. At worst, it would result in a neutral position from Russia regarding the disputing issues, at best; it would garner clear support on the issue. The former strategy is the one that Putin has employed in recent years. Upon asking in an interview to Indian Press, the Russian President responded that he did not find it appropriate to take sides. He reportedly added, "I believe Pakistan is taking immense steps to stabilize the situation in the country".<sup>36</sup> This may not be a conclusive analysis, but it makes the situation darker for India who has enjoyed Russian unconditional support for decades.

Furthermore, Pakistan would also benefit from cooperation with Russia in the energy sector improving the economic status of Pakistan.<sup>37</sup> India has always tried to keep Pakistan occupied in domestic issues through sponsoring terrorism and sectarianism. Anti-Pakistan oriented Indian foreign policy would leave a gap in the region, keeping it from cooperation with China or Russia, a gap that Pakistan's current leadership seems eager to fill. Indian literature still views the Pak-Russia rapprochement as a lesser threat if it remains restricted to economic partnership. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that if this partnership deepens in the military sector, then it can pose a substantial threat to Indo-Russian ties.<sup>38</sup>

Adding to Indian insecurities is the CPEC of Pakistan, which in the bigger picture facilitates and embraces Russian and Chinese aims to build a greater Eurasia. India has always opposed CPEC and the Chinese BRI project that ensures Chinese strength and economic prowess. Russia and Pakistan joining hands with China inevitably push India in a position of concern and apprehensions. This partnership provides clear benefits for Pakistan, India is bound to stay alert about such advancements in the region. The stakes are high for India and Pakistan both because choosing to look eastward would bring Pakistan western disapproval, whereas India would jeopardize regional security and stability by being unequivocally Pro-West.



## Conclusion

Russia and Pakistan move toward a mutually beneficial relationship after a history of hostile and opposing attitudes. Pakistan's efforts to appease the west failed repeatedly, forcing Pakistan to seek interests beyond the western sphere. The time is ripe for Russia and Pakistan to build ties that secure future interests and plans while India clearly expresses its disdain over CPEC and greater Eurasia that would strengthen China and benefit Pakistan for being a part of the equation. The US aims to strengthen India as the pivot to Asia while Asian powers follow a different route to progress. The state of events leads to Indian insecurities about regional and global consequences for India. These Indian concerns range from domestic, political to the military in nature. It becomes obvious that a developing Pakistan would be a matter of concern for India while an expanding Russia would disturb American plans.

Moreover, a multipolar world, resulting from the global and regional situations discussed in the paper, may result in a more stable world. The unipolar world saw the devastation of many governments and once cosmopolitan cities, a multipolar world will inevitably be a deterrent in the way of any such advancement by any one power. On the contrary, such deterrents may give the developing and rehabilitating countries a chance to breathe and develop gaining assistance and support from the country they choose to support. Furthermore, a multipolar world set to appear is bound to follow Chinese principles of growth and development assistance. Thus, the Pak-Russia relationship could not only bring stability in the region constraining Indian aggressiveness but also globally by acting as a deterrent to their military-based expansion. India has the option to focus on building good ties with the USA and exploring new avenues elsewhere or it may take a route of animosity toward Pak-Russia partnerships backed by the USA.

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