



## Balance of Power in South Asia: Concerning Russian Role

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### Abstract

*Russia's engagement in South Asia has been shaped by its strategic interests: its quest for warm water, the routes of its gas pipeline, and its policy for curtailing U.S. hegemony. It has always been a dominant actor of South Asian Politics. The international dynamics have changed Russian strategies at different intervals. Initially, it was inclined towards India; however, in the current scenario, it has recognized the significance of Pakistan for a peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan and linking the Euro Asian union with South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and beyond. The paper highlights the changes in Russian policies towards South Asia and its due role in the balance of power between Pakistan and India. Russian strategic interest in South Asia and its relationship with India and Pakistan are the sole factors responsible for Russian involvement in BOP between Pakistan and India.*

**Key Words:** Russia, Pakistan, India, International Dynamics, Russia-China Rapprochement, New Power Politics Game, Balance of Power

### Introduction

As South Asia is one of the most significant regions in global politics, Russia has been interested in this region from the very beginning. The strategic interest of Russia in South Asia is based on its three main objectives; firstly, the routes of its gas pipeline through South Asia. Secondly, the issue of its security related to Afghanistan, particularly the entrance of militants in Central Asian Republics and drug trafficking, and thirdly its desire for access to the Arabian Sea and oil-rich Middle East. The shortest trade routes to three regions of the world, i.e., Middle East, Europe, and Africa, are provided by South Asia, which increased its strategic significance for significant powers, including Russia. Hence, the main objective of Russian policy is to seek ways to achieve strategic, economic, and

political gains through South Asia ([Rashna, 2016](#)).

Russia was once a superpower, and its primary power quest did not dissipate even after its disintegration. Russian policies are now more focused on its economic stability. However, such perceptions are generated by its ties with China that its foreign policy has band-wagoned with China and played second-fiddle. The fact is that U.S. hegemony is the reason for the upward trend in their relations ([Rashna, 2016](#)).

### Russia Relations with Pakistan

As far as the relation of Russia and Pakistan is concerned, it is full of misunderstandings and distrust. Their hostility started in 1949 when the Former USSR and Pakistan invited the then Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan to join its rival

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and competitor, the United States. Such a risky decision of Pakistan paved the way to misperception in its relation with Russia ([Mahmood & Baloch, 2013](#)).

During the Cold War, Pakistan got aligned with the Western camp and became a beneficiary of American support, particularly military and economy. In contrast, the Soviet Union similarly supports India (the Russian Federation is still an arms exporter to India). Moreover, through multilateral formats, Pakistan, as a member of CENTO and SEATO, focused on reducing the Soviet influence in the region. Furthermore, Pakistan proved contributory in sponsoring and arming the Mujahideen on behalf of the United States during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

Thereafter, the relations between both the countries show no warmth. However, the truth is that Pakistan had no independent coverage towards Russia, at least till it gave up on the cold war. Soviet Union has constantly seen Pakistan through the prism of the U.S. and concerning its relations with India ([Mahmood & Baloch, 2013](#)).

However, in the post-9/11 scenario, some improvements arose in their relations, and a remarkable change occurred in the thoughts of leaders of both countries towards each other ([Basrur, 2009](#)). Pakistan cannot be ignored by significant powers precisely due to its geostrategic position and essential character in international politics ([Mahmood & Baloch, 2013](#)).

In recent years, Pakistan became significant for Russia's diplomatic and strategic interests regarding international orientation. The following factors are responsible for Russia's quest for better relations with Pakistan:

- The post-2014 security situation make Russia follow a multi-vectored policy in South Asia.
- The quest of Russia for capturing new markets for defense exports and the probability of Pakistan to be a buyer.
- In order to control domestic Muslim insurgents in Russia, it needs Pakistan's assistance.

- Russia seeks to assert a leadership role in South Asia, thereby increasing its sphere of influence.
- Russia wants to check and counter-balance U.S influence in the path of its sphere of influence anywhere, particularly in South Asia ([Kuchins, 2014](#))

## Russia Relations with India

Unlike Pakistan, the relation of India and the former Soviet Union and Russian Federation is based on trust and cooperation. From the very beginning since independence, the Soviet Union offered significant advantages to India by developing its core industries and paving the way for future growth and development ([Michael, 2018](#)).

In the Cold War era, when Pakistan aligned with the West, the Soviet Union offered support to India, and the former Soviet Union safeguarded many vital interests of India, notably the Jammu and Kashmir issue. The strong support of the Soviet Union accomplished many scientific and technological objectives of India ([Iha, 1971](#)). This includes development in Space and nuclear energy. This cooperation was further deepened by the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 1971. The former Soviet Union and its successor states have enlarged India's defense forces by providing technology, training, and equipment support. The bilateral relation between India and Russia is mainly because they cooperate in military and technology ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

Following the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991, the relations between India and Russia cooled down as Russia itself began to focus on its internal unrest and destructed economy. It was a challenging phase for Russia as the disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of its military and industrial complex. Such a hazardous situation affected Russia's defense supplies to India because Russia initiated its economic reforms. This was the time when the strategic relations of India and Russia underwent changes as the West and Israel became sources of defense supplies to India ([Kantha, 1989](#)). In fact, the Russian state was also looking westwards for its reforms. Despite the drift in their relation, India has consistently recognized the importance of Russia. The fact is that India was always

independent in its foreign decisions and worked on the principle that its relation with Russia is not at the cost of its relationship with other major powers or friends. Thereby India is independent in its dealings of foreign relations. Such an autonomous approach that shapes India's policy of conducting relations with nations is based on its peaceful policy of mutual cooperation with all countries. Thus, India's efforts to cooperate with SAARC, ASEAN, and IBSA member countries continue. However, there is a need to improve the relationship between India and Russia according to changing global environment ([Stobdan, 2010](#)). As far as strategic cooperation and trade are concerned, India is the primary partner and importer of Russian arms and military equipment ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

During the president and former Premier Putin's reign, Russia continued to expand ties with India. According to Russia's perspective, India is a natural strategic partner with similar views on many regional and global issues. Moreover, Russia also appears to view India as a rising power, a better supporter of Russia's interests in the region ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

India has received substantial assistance from Russia in developing its military and nuclear power industry. In 2010, both countries signed a scheme for long-term cooperation in the nuclear field. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP) is the chief project of their partnership. The first and second reactors (1000MW) for Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant were conveyed by Russia. Moreover, the agreements for third and fourth reactors for Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant were also signed, expanding their nuclear cooperation ([Singh, 1970](#)). The agreement of financing these reactors was signed in July 2012 in which Russia ratified for nuclear fuel purchase and financing partial construction by emitting export loans of over 4 billion U.S. dollars because Russia was concerned about their position in the Indian arms market, particularly regarding the United States who was trying to dominate and capture Indian civilian nuclear power market. Thus, Nuclear power is also an important area of Russian and Indian engagement ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

India can play a significant role in "Global Balance of Power" from Russia's perspective,

and thus it opted for its permanent seat in United Nations Security Council. However, it can be said that the strategic relationship between India and Russia is flourishing. However, conflict in their relationship is also possible as India is more concerned about increasing the ties of Moscow with Islamabad, and Russia is concerned about New Delhi's ties with Washington ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

### **Russian Strategic Interests in South Asia**

Russian intelligence agencies have always been concerned about South Asian security as the most potent influencer, and implementer in the region is its military and industrial power because South Asia is Russia's most significant arms market. India being an arms market for Russia is the central contribution to the bilateral economic relation of India and Russia. However, with the world's ever-changing scenario, the nature of this cooperation is unclear because the recent Indo-US nuclear deal has threatened Russia's interests in South Asia by threatening Russia's dominance in the Indian arms market ([Bhutto, 1964](#)).

Russia has deep strategic interests regarding its engagement in Afghanistan; even after the defeat in the Soviet-Afghan war, it did not completely leave the region. The main reason for Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was its national interest, that is; its interest in the Indian ocean and oil-rich Middle East and Central Asian states and its objective of halting the loss of the Soviets itself, the primary aim of which was to cease the depose of an existing Communist government in the neighboring country of Soviet Union by insurgency as it can give rise to vexation in the Central Asian residents of the Soviet Union itself ([Arsa, 2008](#)).

In the period after the cold war, Russia has reconstructed the economic infrastructure of Afghanistan by rebuilding the past 150 significant projects of the Cold War era. Thus, it can be said that the post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has increased Russian economic engagement with Afghanistan.

The thirst for curtailing Turkmenistan's and Iranian natural gas exportation to Europe (traditional competitor) is the vital interest of Gazprom (Russian Energy Company). Russia is also interested in the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) pipeline to

South Asia. After the Indo-US nuclear deal, Pakistan, a front-line ally of the U.S., felt insecure and thus tended to move towards Chinese and Russian blocs. One of the basic reasons for the newly emerging ties of Russia with Pakistan is the strategic imperative to manage Afghanistan after the 2014 U.S. withdrawal. From the Russian perspective, Afghanistan's situation and other crucial factors are necessary to coordinate with Pakistan, such as counterterrorism, smuggling, and anti-narcotics efforts ([Rashna, 2016](#)).

In the current scenario, South Asia is one of the most challenging regions for Russia as it is not only concerned about security but also its desire to emerge as a rising economic power to persuade its significant economic interests in the emerging world order by acting as a bridge between the developed 'North' and the developing 'South' ([Shukla, 1999](#)).

### **Russian Foreign Policy**

As far as the priority of Russian Foreign Policy is taken into account, it is mainly based on the protection of its interests and its significant role in international politics worldwide. It also considers the United Nations sacred and wants it to be authoritative in settling disputes and conflicts. Furthermore, it wants to extend its sphere of influence to its neighbors and the West and United States. In short, the most vital aim of Russia is to be capable enough to recommence its lost position in the international arena ([Mahmood & Baloch, 2013](#)).

### **Russian Foreign Policy towards the South Asian States**

From the very history, three factors have shaped Russia's foreign policy towards South Asia: firstly, its quest for warm water; secondly, its competition with rising China; and finally, its thirst to counter the United States influence in the area. As Russia has a land-locked location, so it has an excellent quest for warm water ports from the very beginning. In fact, its centuries-old quest for warm water is the most crucial reason for its invasion of Afghanistan during the Cold War. Keeping in view the Russian

quest for warm water, it cannot be assumed that Russia's quest for warm water is

diminished after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. It has grown, and now Russia wants it more than before to make links with the world's largest gas reserves. Regarding these long-term objectives in the region, Russia has always followed pro-India policy in both phases, i.e., in Cold War and post-Cold War ([Belasco, 2009](#)). However, in the current scenario, changes in the international political environment have fetched Pakistan and Russia closer. The United States withdrawal of Afghanistan in 2014 has further improved their relation in the post-withdrawal scenario ([Mahmood & Baloch, 2013](#)).

### **Russian role as a Balancer**

Keeping its strategic interests in the region, Russia's significant attention is devoted to South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan ([Moskalenko & Topychkanov, 2014](#)). Following the Soviet Union's disintegration, when Russia emerged as a dominant heir of Superpower, the main challenge faced by Russia was to adjust in the environment its lost capabilities and gain the same. For this purpose, Russia searched for powerful allies and adopted a pro-west policy for its growth and prosperity. India was also trying to deal with the situation by adjusting to the new post-Soviet reality. Having convergence of interests with the United States and divergence of interests with Russia, the relation of India and Russia cooled down. Instead, India moved towards the United States, and new areas of cooperation arose.

However, when Vladimir Putin took charge, an improvement arose in its relation with India. He again adopted pro India policy by establishing a strategic partnership with India in 2000. Later on, in 2010, this partnership ameliorated a more privileged partnership. Since then, positive improvements have begun to arise in their cooperation. However, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 has brought new challenges to their relationship. The United States' ties with India and Afghanistan have precipitated Russia and Pakistan to come closer ([Pant, 2017](#)).

### **Russia in favor of Pakistan**

There is a noticeable shift in Russian policy of the South Asian Region regarding Pakistan,

where traditionally India occupied a central position for Russia. Now Russia has recognized the importance of Pakistan in linking the "Eurasian Union" with "South Asia", "Indian Ocean" and beyond. The vitality of Pakistan in the peaceful political settlement in Afghanistan can also be not ignored in this context ([Arsa, 2008](#)).

The historical Russia-India convergence on Afghanistan is no longer there as Russia considers the Taliban as part of the solution. India on the other hand also looks at Sino-Russian strategic cooperation and warming up Pak-Russian ties with suspicions. India remained an important arms market for Russia; however, the USA-India nuclear deal and growing USA-India strategic ties threatened Russia's foothold in Indian arms market. These are changes in regional orientation causing a change in Russian policy goals ([Pant, 2017](#)).

Changes in Russian policy goals and changes in international and regional orientations caused a shift in Russia's relation with Pakistan. Recent developments in Pakistan-Russia relations such as lifting arms embargo by Russia, talks on selling of SU-35 and SU-37 fighter Jets and Mi-35 Attack Helicopters to Pakistan, Pak-Russian joint military exercises, accommodating Pakistan's views on stability in Afghanistan, arms deal and energy agreements demonstrate that Russia is moving closer towards Pakistan while drifting away from its India-centric approach in South Asia ([Khan, 2016](#)).

### **China Factor**

In the post-Soviet period Russian policy goals have changed in South Asia. Russia is no more observing India as a way to counter China as it will not work in the absence of ideological and geo-political struggles between Russia and China. Instead Moscow and Beijing became close strategic partners and resolved their border dispute by dividing equally the disputed islands in the Amur River of Khabarovski Krai in 2004 ([Pant, 2017](#)). Both China and Russia are antagonists of the U.S. 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 occurred. In other words, a new triple alliance in the form of China-Russia-Pakistan has been in swing. Consequently, the main target of the imminent triple alliance would be none other but to counter the rising Indo-US strategic maneuvering in the Indo-Pacific region in general and South Asia in particular ([Khan, 2016](#)).

### **Emergence of Triangular Relation**

In South Asia, there are two nuclear powers operating in a continuous state of rivalry while three external major powers influence the balance of power between Pakistan and India. In fact, all these five nuclear powers (China, India, Pakistan, Russia and the United States) are adopting different techniques to maintain South Asian as well as global balance of power ([Singh, 1970](#)).

India arms trade with Russia has minimized because India is tilting more towards United States who has taken Russia's place in India arms market. Moreover, the Indo-US Civilian Nuclear Deal has also cooled down the strategic relation of India and Russia. Hence, Russia has taken steps towards Pakistan and China in order to check the United States extra involvement in the region. For this purpose, an alliance has been established by China, Pakistan and Russia, the main objective of which is to keep the U.S. away from the regional affairs. This is also to counter-weight the emerging Indo-US rapprochement, but the alliance is also inducing India to face critical challenges as the vital supporter of the United States in the region ([Iha, 1971](#)).

Sino-Pakistan antagonism with India revolved around various reasons including their border issues, rising Islamic insurgency, growing Indo-US ties, Afghanistan problem, regional power politics and cross-border terrorism. Thus, India might face serious challenges by Russia affinity with China and Pakistan. Once consolidated, China, Pakistan, and Russia triangular relations could cause serious consequences for India in general and the entire region in particular ([Singh & Thoker, 2017](#)).

### **Changing International Order**

Sensing the warmth between India and USA and close collaboration between Russia and

China, Primakov the then Prime Minister of Russia presented the idea to form a 'strategic triangle' i.e., Russia, China and India against USA in 1998. India response was not affirmative in the face of long-standing rivalry with Beijing and warming relations between New Delhi and Washington. Putin had visited India four times as president since 2000 and once as Prime Minister in 2010 but could not succeed in drawing India away from its strategic partnership with USA. It is acknowledged that Russia's ability to keep India out of USA's orbit is limited. Consequently, Russian India-centric approach in South Asia came to an end ([Singh, 1970](#)).

Pakistan was granted status of superior South Asian state with which Russia sought to further develop strategic and economic cooperation under President Medvedev's Foreign Policy Concept of 2008. However, the two Foreign Policy Concepts of Russian Federation, i.e., 2013 and 2016 do not carry any official statement on its policy towards Pakistan. Since 2008, Russian Former President Medvedev and Pakistan's Former President met four times on the side lines of multilateral meetings. In 2011, Russia and Pakistan underscored joint efforts for peace and reconstruction of Afghanistan and signed many agreements on cooperation in areas of energy and agriculture when the then President of Pakistan visited Moscow. In 2014, Russia lifted embargo on arms supply to Pakistan, while in November 2014 the defence minister of Russia visited Pakistan and signed agreements on expansion of defence and military relations along with agreement for Mi-35 helicopters sale to Pakistan ([Belasco, 2009](#)).

In post-2014 period, Russia desires to manage security in Afghanistan in close cooperation with Pakistan as shown by arranging meetings over Afghanistan with Pakistan and China in December 2016 and February 2017. Since 2009, Russia sought to increase its diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan. In 2010, Russia offered \$12b loan to Afghanistan and started work on several infrastructure projects in the country ([Subtain, Hussain, Farooq, & Khan, 2016](#)). In 2011, Russia agreed to a northern supply route via Russia and Central Asia to Afghanistan for NATO supply which proved to be very costly in comparison to supply route via Pakistan. Russia's main

objectives in Afghanistan seem to have a manageable chaos in order to bleed its arch rival USA financially and to have control over Central Asian-South Asian integration via Afghanistan and Pakistan ([Khan, 2016](#)).

With the USA in relative decline and China growing more powerful, transformation has arisen in rules of the game. Economically growing Asia is taken into account by major powers as the Centre of global power is shifting from West to Asia and new alignments and re-alignments are in gestation. This is change in international orientation, as now Russia is looking towards Asia for new markets. Thus, a shift took place in Russia foreign policy towards South Asia, as following the Afghanistan factor, Pakistan became more important for Russia. Russia also views Pakistan significant regarding access to Arabian Sea and beyond via China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Russia recognizes Pakistan's geostrategic significance in this region, as Pakistan due to its geographical location has the potential to connect Eurasia Union with Indian Ocean and beyond ([Kuchins, 2014](#)).

For the last many years, Russia has been focusing on Pakistan for building long-term military, political, and economic relations. Pakistan-Russia joint military exercises 'Druzba 2016 and 2018' in Pakistan and 'Druzba 2017' in Russia signify growing trust between the two states. At the same time, Russia values Pakistan's geographical location. It desires to assist Pakistan in its peaceful integration into the multi-polar Eurasian framework being constructed by Russia-Chinese strategic cooperation, while multimodal CPEC provides the best opportunity to link Eurasia with South Asia. To materialize this concept, peaceful and stable Afghanistan is the prerequisite to provide direct contact between Eurasia, South Asia, and beyond. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides another valuable platform for China, Pakistan, and Russia to deliberate upon regional security and peaceful integration issues. Pakistan's permanent membership of SCO is undoubtedly a result of China's support, but it would have been impossible without Russia's facilitation. So here, Russia plays an important role as a balancer ([Khan, 2016](#)).

## **Conclusion**

Russia being the legitimate successor of Soviet Union was once a great super power and its quest for power is shaping its involvement in South Asian region. From the very beginning, Russia is taking interest in the region because South Asia was a huge market for Russian arms. During the Soviet Union era and even after the collapse of Soviet Union, it was more inclined towards India while its relation with Pakistan was hostile. However, in current scenario particularly the Indo U.S. civilian nuclear deal, the great game changes and Russian policy makers began to think about improving relations with Pakistan due to its long term hostility with USA. Russian strategic interest in South Asia lies in its quest for warm water, its competition with rising China and its thirst for countering the U.S. hegemony. For this, Russia

has adopted strategies well suited to its interests. Initially, containment of China was one of the objectives of Russian foreign policy but now the Russian policy makers are not considering India as an ally against China as the former is more inclined in curtailing U.S. influence in South Asian region. Thus, Russia has taken steps towards Pakistan and China to check the United States extra involvement in the region. Afghanistan is also an essential factor for the upward trend in Pak-Russian relations following 2014 U.S. drawdown. Russia is striving to ensure security of Afghanistan through cooperation with Pakistan. It is asserted that the whole game of politics revolves around convergence of interests. Russian strategic interest in South Asia has played an important role in balancing power between Pakistan and India at different intervals.

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