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OPINION | Russia-Pakistan Military Cooperation: A Tectonic Shift?

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On September 24, 2016, Russian Ground Forces and the Pakistani Army showcased their arsenal and demonstrated safety mechanism techniques at the Army High Altitude School in Rattu and at a special forces training center in Cherat in northern Pakistan. A first of its kind joint military exercise, termed **Druzghba-2016** (Friendship 2016), was followed by a round of consultations between the respective foreign officiates in December 2016, in Islamabad. In addition, Pakistan's military plans to receive four Russian-made Mi-35M attack helicopters in 2017. Perceptibly, China is pressing Russia to take Pakistan on board for a triangular strategic partnership, starting with a round of talks in Moscow on issues relating to the rise of Islamic States's foothold in Afghanistan and Russia's potential role in the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** project.

Many have been quick to conclude that Russia's unfolding proximity with Pakistan-China axis is prompted by India's intensive partnership with the United States. What intriguing is, the future contour of India-Russia strategic partnership which may **"lose its durable bedrock"** to onset a geopolitical tectonic shift in the years ahead. Undoubtedly, Pakistan's interest in Russia is nothing new. During the 1990s the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto visited Moscow with a futile attempt to convince the Russian leadership for a strategic partnership. Perhaps The United States' presence in Afghanistan and Iraq post-9/11 and the decade of volatility that followed attracted Russia's attention towards Pakistan. This resulted in Pakistan's army chief Raheel Sharif's visit to Moscow in **June 2015** – the first Pakistani army chief in decades to visit Moscow. Subsequently, "Foreign Secretaries of Russia, China and Pakistan in their meeting on 27th Dec 2016 at Moscow decided to seek flexible approaches including the lifting of UN sanctions against select Taliban leaders to broker peace with the group in **Afghanistan**."

One would argue that Russia intends to engage Islamabad merely because Pakistan, playing a crucial role in Asian geopolitical problems, should be part of any solution as well. But does Russia take into account India's strategic concerns? Can Russia afford to lose India? In reality, India's bonhomie with the U.S. may be a factor in Russia's calculation. A major chunk of Indian defense and energy bills used to go to Russia, but the U.S. has emerged as a viable alternative now. However, abysmal all in economic dependence on India and Russia would not come about soon given the depth of their decades-old ties. Bilateral relations in the domain of defense, nuclear energy, and hydrocarbons will continue to dominate the strategic partnership between Russia and India. So far, India has been the biggest market for Russian military hardware during 1992 to 2015. An agreement to purchase of Russian Long-Range Surface to Air Missile Systems, S-400, has been signed. India-Russia economic cooperation, especially in the energy sector, is not likely to be eroded at the behest of evolving Russia Pakistan strategic

relationship.

However, Russia's engagement with Pakistan and the evolving triangular partnership among China, Pakistan, and Russia will have at least two consequences. Firstly, Russia's potential investment in Pakistan's Gwadar Port – which is part of the CPEC project – will have direct geopolitical concerns for India. Secondly, Russia's apparent acceptance of Chinese push to mend ties with Pakistan, unmindful of the impact on solid relations with India, indicates that India will not get the usual unwavering Russian support on the international stage anymore.

In recent times, one can find many unusual alliances. After fifty years of topsy-turvy relations, USA and India claim to be “natural allies”, especially de-hyphenating India from Pakistan – the non-NATO ally. Similarly, Russia's inching towards Pakistan after many decades of animosity, as a new balancing technique. It seems that “transactional diplomacy” has triumphed over long-term “value-based policy” in this era of post-9/11 world order, [as described by Jean-Marie Geuhanno](#), the Director of International Crisis Group.

Incidentally, Russia under severe economic stagnation, owing to the sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea, is in search of new markets for its defense industry. An alliance with Pakistan, at some level, can be considered a short-term move fuelled by economic motives. But the traditional alliance between India and Russia extended beyond economic and military cooperation into the realm of culture is unprecedented. There was a sense of sanctity in the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 1971 – a unique example of bilateral diplomacy between the two countries considering the formers' commitment towards non-alignment. On the other hand, the Pakistan-Russia joint military cooperation bears no such sanctimonious resemblance.

For India, probably the need is to redefine and reorient its strategic relations with Russia keeping in mind its evolving warm relations with the U.S. An alliance, after all, comes with certain expectations on both sides. In regard to Pakistan, it is more important for India to grasp what Pakistan expects out of Russia beyond military gains; and what Russia gains by inching closer towards Pakistan beyond economic gains?

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