

RESURGENCE OF RUSSIA AS A GREAT POWER AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATION TOWARDS SOUTH ASIA

*Syed Taimoor Shah and Ayesha Afgun**

Abstract

Russia has re-emerged as an important global actor after the advent of the post-Soviet era. Kremlin's repositioning in the global affairs under President Vladimir Putin has led to a geopolitical and geostrategic transformation of its foreign policy. It follows multilateralism with active outreach in different parts of the world. In contemporary Russian foreign policy, there are tangible determinants that call for multipolar world order including realignment of foreign relations and consolidation of great power status. This paper, therefore, examines Russian foreign policy in the post-Crimean annexation era, where Moscow launched various campaigns through active engagements with the world's larger economies and strategically important countries, such as China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The paper also highlights Russia's evolving bilateral relations with these countries, especially in economic, political, and military spheres. Following the current global geopolitical realities, it also attempts to mark clear adjustments in Moscow's foreign policy with respect to its power, responsibility, and ambitions for international peace and stability.

Keywords: Great Power, Kremlin, Foreign Policy, South Asia, Multipolar.

Introduction

The tectonic shift in the geopolitical landscape of the world is apparent and transmuting in different ways. As the geopolitical order of the world, previously transitioned from bipolarity (post-World War II) to unipolarity (post-Cold War), is transforming into a multipolar world order, Russia is strengthening its geostrategic position through intensified engagements with the rest of the world. During the Cold War era, Soviet influence on global affairs was mired by their internal challenges and external pressures; however, Moscow has resurged as one of the prominent players in the international arena by reacquiring its decades-old status of great power. In the 21st century, Russia is emerging as a great power with a major shift in its foreign policy, fully focused on continuously evolving geopolitical and geostrategic environment of the world, especially the South Asian region.

*Syed Taimoor Shah and Ayesha Afgun are Research Associates at the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis, National Defence University, Islamabad.

With a definite set of objectives, Russia has a clear aim of consolidating its domestic affairs and strengthening its position beyond international borders.¹ After the successful venture of Crimean annexation in 2014, protection of the Syrian regime, and prompt participation in the complex Middle Eastern region, Russian policymakers are now directed towards South Asia to regain influence in its backyard. South Asia has always remained a region of cooperation and confrontation between neighboring states and great powers. It hosts the world's oldest civilizations and largest population as a hub of growing economies and strategically important South Asian countries residing in the proximity of China.

The growing relationship between Russia and China is based on strong economic, political, and military ties despite having external pressure, especially from the US. Both countries defy the anticipated notion of a unitary West. This strategic partnership is expected to circumvent US sanctions against Russia and trade wars with China. Both countries are working together to enhance their economic and strategic cooperation and maintaining stability in the region. They share similar views on the geopolitical situation in the Middle East, Catch-22 situation in the Asia Pacific, and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula while dealing with a precarious security situation in South Asia. Russia has always maintained friendly ties with India. This relationship started soon after the Indian independence when Delhi joined Moscow-camp but maintained its non-aligned policy. For decades, India remained one of the biggest buyers of Russian defense equipment. Both countries shared similar views on multiple issues, which helped avoid confrontation and disagreement. However, India's complete submission to current US policy on China's containment in the region (once imposed on Soviets), engaging in Sino-Indian standoff at Ladakh (territorial dispute at LAC), and displaying an offensive posture for its neighbors (unnecessary interference in the Afghan peace process and frequent violations of ceasefire at LOC) through the subjugation of minorities at home (especially Kashmiri Muslims) are the major concerns for Russian bilateral arrangements in the region. The recent diplomatic occurrences between the two countries do not suggest a further enhancement in their relations, in near future.

Russia has readjusted its policy towards Afghanistan - the country once Soviets invaded and retreated from. Russia also remains deeply concerned about its 'near abroad' region, i.e., Central Asia (once part of the USSR) as the security situation in Afghanistan may spillover to this region. With this apprehension, Russia has started engaging with all the stakeholders in Afghanistan including its old foes. Due to its first-hand experience in the Middle East, Moscow also fears increasing footprints of terrorist organizations like ISIS in the region, thus, enhancing its engagements with state and non-state actors to find a peaceful solution in Afghanistan. Likewise, Russia has strategized its policy towards Pakistan, an important regional actor playing an important role in regional socio-economic connectivity through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI-project. Russian tilt towards Pakistan, while having a comprehensive strategic alliance with China and readjustment of its foreign policy towards South Asia, indicates that the Russia-Pakistan strategic relationship is

reaching new highs. The reciprocated high-level visits, joint military exercises, and lifting arms sale restrictions are the proofs of a significant strategic transformation in Russian foreign policy towards Pakistan.

At present, Russia is strongly contesting the existing international order to counterweight the preponderant ascendancy of the West and its allies, who aspire to maintain unipolarity in the global system. The changing geopolitical realities, growing economic interdependencies, and increasing military alliances, especially in South Asia and the Middle East, are vital considerations for Russia in redefining its foreign policy as a great power. Russia is, therefore, swiftly emerging as an influential global player in establishing a multipolar world system by engaging regional actors in political, economic, and strategic domains. In such a transitional environment, this paper, therefore, examines Russian foreign policy in the post-Crimean annexation era, where Moscow launched various campaigns through active engagements with the world's larger economies and strategically important countries, such as China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The paper also highlights Russia's evolving bilateral relations with these countries, especially in economic, political, and military spheres. Following the current global geopolitical realities, it also attempts to mark clear adjustments in Moscow's foreign policy with respect to its power, responsibility, and ambitions for international peace and stability.

Outlook of Russia's Foreign Policy towards South Asia

Historically, the South Asian region remained under the strict surveillance of the Soviet policy-making apparatus. During the 19th century, a tussle between Russian and British empires emerged, which was dubbed as Great Game or *Bolshaya Igra*, in which Britain sought influence in Central Asia to buffer the crown jewel of its empire, i.e., British India. The Russian empire could not assert its dominance in the region due to the strong footprints of the British empire. During the 1970s, another attempt was made to gain a dominant role in South Asia, which resulted in the Soviet-Afghan war followed by the disintegration of the USSR. However, Russia's strive to redefine its interest in the region became apparent in the post-Cold War era, specifically, post-9/11.

Traditionally, Russia has been maintaining friendly relations with India, and most of the time, India remained the epicenter of its foreign policy towards South Asia. However, a strategic shift was observed in the aftermath of the 2014-Ukrainian Crisis, when Russia inclined more towards China for its political support and economic cooperation. Today, Russia's South Asia policy can be seen as a multi-vectored strategy to meet changing geopolitical realities in the region. The significant aspects of existing Russian foreign policy towards South Asia include seeking peace in Afghanistan, securing energy (gas pipelines) and trade routes passing through the region, and gaining access to warm waters. Afghanistan, therefore, remains a strategically important country for Russians as it provides strategic space to access warm waters in the South through CPEC. Kremlin administration, once hostile towards Kabul, is now keen on reaching a peaceful solution in Afghanistan to reduce instability and

insecurity in the region. Such a major shift in Russian foreign policy is also linked to its Central Asia policy aimed at isolating the US in the Eurasian region.

Russia has adopted multilateralism as a foreign policy instrument to increase its strategic and economic outreach. In this regard, the Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization have been integral. Also, Russia has joined hands with China on its Silk and Road initiative by reiterating its support to BRI and CPEC. Similarly, Pakistan-Russia relations have seen an upwards trend in the last couple of years. Russia has moved away from defining its relations with Pakistan based upon its relationship with India. Both countries have signed various bilateral agreements and conducted military exercises. Today, Russia is actively engaged with the regional states to counter the US-led western influence in the region, while promoting multilateralism in the international system. However, Russia's economic and political limitations have made it difficult to maintain its active presence throughout the region. The rest of South Asian countries do not feature as predominantly as Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and neighboring China in Russian geopolitical calculations. Russia only maintains trade and commerce with the rest of the region.

Russia's Foreign Policy Transition in South Asia

Russia, due to its geopolitical setting, military might, resourcefulness, and diplomatic acumen at the global level has acquired a central stage in world politics. The country has a tremendous history; it pursued a powerful image through reformists like Peter I and Catherine II and launched successful military campaigns in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the end of the Cold War, the country faced severe economic and political impediments. However, it constantly struggled to maintain 'Great Power' status. Today, Russia is passing through a transitional phase of its foreign policy formulation, thus, raising questions, whether this transition is a new phenomenon or a result of the Kremlin's opportunism or a pure transformation of its foreign policy with the changing world order. It is argued that since Putin became President in 2012, he has chosen a course that is starkly different from the one he pursued in his previous terms; therefore, follows a nationalist, neo-revisionist, and neo-Eurasian approach.

Russia's foreign policy is passing through a transitional phase focusing on its old traditional values, maintaining sovereignty, and advocating for security and stability.² Russia's foreign policy has become a subject of concern for western countries after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, this annexation decisively affirmed the rejection of post-Cold War security arrangements of the West and the resurgence of Russia as a strong global player. It is also argued that Russia has once again made nationalism a popular appeal for its domestic audience. As the Crimean adventure was a bold step taken by Russia, it depicts a renewed nationalistic and more sovereign behavior in policymaking.³ Russia's foreign policy, despite facing a vast array of sanctions imposed by the US targeting Russia's core interests across the globe, is becoming more resolute and uncompromising in dealing with the West's policies.⁴ In the changing world order situation, where the Yalta-based economic and political

system has become obsolete, Russia is moving towards economic growth while playing an important role in global peace and security, and enhancing relations with neighbors, especially with China and South Asia.

At present, realism is the main driving force for Russia's foreign policy towards South Asia, which is quite visible in setting its geostrategic priorities.⁵ Russia has opted for a multidimensional approach sliding it away from the West and moving to the East, swiftly and smoothly.⁶ In the process, two worldviews emerged in its foreign policy formulation, i.e., Global and Local. Russia's global view of the world includes China with which Russia has surprisingly warmed up its relations, whereas, local view revolves around Afghanistan, which is of significant concern for Russia's security; Pakistan, with which it is moving forward for better military ties and economic cooperation;⁷ and India, with whom relations are at a standstill because of India's growing interest in Indo-Pacific and Quad alliances.

The current outlook of Russian foreign policy is being determined by certain factors that provide cushioning effect needed for ingress to undercut US interests in the region. However, the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan, withdrawal of the US from the Iran Nuclear deal, Sino-Indian border standoff, and evolving US relations with India are some of the challenges for Russian foreign policy to position itself as a global actor. Russia's policy engagements have become more apparent towards South Asia than before; it values the reality of CPEC; looking for access to the Arabian Sea, and indulging in the adventurism of its huge gas market.⁸ Russia's interests are converging with that of China in the region. Russia recognizes the pivotal role of Pakistan in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan and at the same time looks towards India as a partner, who is more interested in its military hardware and arms sale.

South Asia is one the most challenging, yet an important region from Russia's viewpoint. Not only for its security concerns, but Russia is also luring for economic prospects which would give impetus to its ascending position. Russia is ready to play its role to become a bridge between North and South. It is enhancing its outreach while making alliances through multilateral frameworks, such as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and BRICS. Russia has turned SCO into a regional security body, whose membership has expanded from traditional Central Asian countries to South Asian countries, Pakistan and India. SCO provides an opportunity for Russia and China to hold the South Asian bloc together with greater economic, political, and strategic stability.

Stimulating Ties between Bear and Dragon

The policies of Russia and China coincide with each other in the changing international environment. Their contemporary relationship has witnessed a major shift in their policies towards the outer world advocating multilateralism, where single-state hegemony is denied, sovereignty is given to the state, political and ideological trespassing is not allowed, and equality prevails among the states.⁹ In 2009,

Russia sealed a multibillion-dollar oil deal with China.¹⁰ A state visit by President Putin to China in 2014, proved to be a big leap in Russia's policy transition by signing a US \$ 400 billion thirty-year gas deal.¹¹ Taking mutual and consensual benefits out of it, China will import 38 billion cubic meters of gas from Russia. In recent times, Russia has realized that China is a capable customer of its military equipment while providing access to its growing energy and economic markets. Russia has developed a strong politico-economic-strategic partnership with China while sharing serious concerns over the US influence in the region, thus, brought EAEU and One Belt, One Road (OBOR) closer. It rejects all those assumptions anticipating China-Russia rivalry in Central Asia and reveals their well-connected foreign policy objectives in the region. Cooperation through multilateral platforms like SCO and BRIC is correspondingly cementing their strategic partnership at regional-cum-global level. In 2016, Presidents of both countries met several times sharing their common worldviews from Asia-Pacific to Iran's nuclear program, and messy situation in the Middle East to security situation in South Asia. They have also raised their concerns regarding the double-standards of West's policies based on unilateralism.

Russia-China rapprochement started growing rapidly after the assumption of the Oval office by US President Donald Trump, who preferred unilateralism over multilateralism towards global affairs. Every opposing move made by the US and its western allies has brought China and Russia even closer. However, under President Trump, Washington's policies towards both countries became more aggressive. The inclusion of Russia and China in the US National Security Strategy is the evidence of such growing belligerence.¹² In the contemporary geo-economic settings, both countries bend upon reforming the ineffective and disruptive global financial system by pursuing international trade in their respective or alternative currencies. According to the recent trends, trade-in dollars between the two countries has dropped remarkably.

Russia's Relation with India

Russia and India have been relishing bilateral relations in military, economic, and political spheres since the visit of Indian Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru to Moscow in 1955. The relationship has been on a positive trajectory, since then. In 2016, at the Goa summit, Russia reiterated its stance on exploring new opportunities in the region, strengthening economic ties, pursuing sustainable development, and promoting peace and security at domestic and international levels. Both countries pledged their support towards more transparent and vibrant global governance.¹³ Russia generally identifies pragmatism in developing relations with India to signal the West that its strategic outreach will not be abated by any restrictions imposed on it.¹⁴ Amid the challenging environment of South Asia, their military cooperation steered massive exports of defense and technological equipment ranging from aircraft to tanks and developing India's nuclear capabilities to modernizing Indian Navy. Both countries have been sharing institutionalized mechanisms towards transferring

high-tech equipment and have carried out joint-production ventures for the last many decades.

The signing of US \$ 400 billion deal of S-400 Missile System despite having the threat of sanctions by the US under Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), shows their strategic association in the region.¹⁵ However, the Sino-Indian standoff in Ladakh, India's growing dependency on the US by joining its Indo-Pacific strategy and Quad, and abuse of human rights in India have recently become a matter of concern for Russian policymakers. The accelerating military cooperation between Russia and China against the offensive posture of the US, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and deteriorating Sino-Indian relations over LAC are the due consideration for Russian foreign policy in the region. Consequently, the deal of S-400 Missile System is getting delayed along with the cancellation of a two-decade-old India-Russia annual summit amid ongoing diplomatic row and exchange of divergent views, indicate a visible change in Russian foreign policy towards India.

Russia's Relation with Afghanistan

Since the end of the Cold War, Afghanistan has been a matter of concern for Russians in their pendulum-like policy towards the country; both share a long history.¹⁶ However, after the 2014-withdrawal of US forces, Russia was encouraged to fill the administrative, geopolitical, and geostrategic vacuum in the region. Noticeably, the US and allies could not achieve their security and administrative objectives. Russia's foreign policy towards the region is determined by deteriorating political and security conditions in Afghanistan which Russia fears may engulf the whole region including Central Asia. As for Russia, Afghanistan's security problem takes a significant amount of consideration. Despite troubled past between the two countries with the breakdown of Russia's economic, military and political outreach, Russia aspires to peace in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Russia's interest in Afghanistan stems from the fact that it wants to protect not only itself but also its neighborhood from the influx of ISIS (Daesh), a globally recognized terrorist organization. Moscow believes that the best solution to the Afghan security situation involves bringing all stakeholders to the negotiation table including the Taliban. The successful venture of Moscow against ISIS in Syria makes it a legit player in Afghanistan.

Russia fears that insecurity in Afghanistan may reverberate across the region where Russia has a vital interest. After the unsuccessful US-led adventurism in Afghanistan, Russia is now putting efforts to securitize the region from the rise of extremist elements of Daesh, which might ingress through Central Asia and appear on Russia's doorstep. Russia's relationship with the Afghan government is entwined with complexities. Moscow believes that the Afghan government is fully backed by the deceitful US who runs the business on the ground. Russia aspires for the political reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, the recent shift in its policies towards Afghanistan includes the Taliban as an important entity in

the process. After analyzing the whole Afghan imbroglio, policymakers in Russia are pragmatic and optimistic about their new engagement with the Taliban.

After fighting for decades, the Taliban has become an important player in the Afghan imbroglio. Russia with its untiring efforts has called for trilateral and multilateral engagements to solve the country's diverse problems. Moscow hosted talks with its neighboring countries to head for a peaceful political solution to the Afghan problem. Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President's special envoy to Afghanistan noted that the cooperation between the Taliban is now necessary for a political settlement.¹⁸ Moscow is convinced that the Taliban, who now hold 46% of Afghan territory cannot be vanquished with the use of force. Kabulov acknowledged that the Taliban and Russia share the same objectivity in Afghanistan.¹⁹ The points of convergence of interest between the two are peaceful negotiation process, fighting the inimical forces of Daesh, drug trafficking, and withdrawal of western footsteps from Afghanistan.

Russia's foreign policy is directed towards a peaceful end to the devastating armed conflict in Afghanistan. Moscow is trying to create a balanced geopolitical condition for the region by engaging all regional and international stakeholders in the country's reconstruction and rehabilitation process soon after the conflict ends. Moscow now keeps itself abreast of the changing situation in Afghanistan while maintaining constant contact with all the political players of the country.²⁰

Russia's Relations with Pakistan: Healing Wounds

During the Cold War era, the USSR was at odds with Pakistan because of the latter's strategic support to the US in countering Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. The relations between the two countries, therefore, remained at the lowest ebb in the years following the Cold War era. After the 9/11 incident, both countries found a common ground for tackling the international chaos caused by terrorism. The first *thaw* in their relationship was witnessed with mutually exchanged visits of Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Fradkov, and the then President of Pakistan, Pervaiz Musharraf, in 2003. Subsequently, both countries started moving towards a strategic partnership amid changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment at regional and international level.²¹ The Russian Defense Minister's visit to Pakistan in 2014, marked a new era of friendship between Moscow and Islamabad. During the visit, the first-ever military deal was signed through which Russia committed to selling Mi-35 gunship helicopters to Pakistan.

Russia's transition in its policy orientation towards Pakistan was caused by geopolitical and geostrategic concerns. Kremlin believes that Pakistan can play an important role in the region as the country has an edge due to its geographical location. Despite the horrors of the past, both countries have ground of convergences in South Asia, such as bringing peace in Afghanistan, curbing the menace of terrorism and extremism, and working for better economic ties. Regarding defense cooperation, the year-2014 turned out to be a milestone for Russia and Pakistan since Moscow lifted

its embargo on selling defense equipment to Pakistan.²² Since then, Russia and Pakistan are building their bilateral relations in political, economic, and military domains. Pakistan-Russia joint military exercises *Druzba* (2016), *Druzba-II* (2017), *Druzba-III* (2018), and *Druzba-2019*, are enhancing their strategic partnership. Pakistan also participated in the war games, *Tsentr* (2019) and *Kavkaz* (2020) held in Russia. These military exercises signify a major policy shift in Russia's foreign policy towards Pakistan. Under SCO-RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure), Russia seeks Pakistan's expertise from its successful campaigns against terrorism and extremism in the region, such as *Zarb-e-Azb* and *Rad-ul-Fassad* military operations.

Russia and Pakistan established an institutional framework for their relations on international and regional forums. On these forums, both countries have assured to fight against international terrorism and take measures against the harmful manifestation of ethnic and religious extremism. Russia's affinity with Pakistan and their growing interest in the Afghanistan peace process, highlight the US failure in Afghanistan and the emergence of China's BRI, a transnational development approach towards resettling the world order while pushing unilateralism aside. Russia now endorses Pakistan's stance and echoes the same voice for the political solution to the Afghanistan conflict.²³

Russia always appreciates Pakistan's immense sacrifices in the War on Terror and rejects the western-backed false Indian hostile-propaganda against Pakistan and unpopular US rhetoric of "Do more". Russia considers Pakistan a key regional player, eagerly pursuing regional socio-economic connectivity through CPEC, to cooperate with and urging the international community to avoid any misadventure in the region as it will put negative repercussions on the security situation of the region. Russia has a clear stance on the Kashmir issue and always supports Pakistan's stand against Indian aggression in the region. The growing Sino-Indian border skirmishes along LAC and increasing Indian involvement in cross-border terrorism are the major concerns for Russia and Pakistan, thus, accelerating their mutual military and economic cooperation.

Moscow has also joined with Islamabad and Beijing in urging the UNSC to delist Taliban leaders from the terrorist list. This "troika" (a driving combination of three horses in the Russian tradition) is seeking mutual ground for the convergence of their efforts in achieving the strategic capacity to counter hostile forces in the region. The inclusion of Pakistan as a permanent member in SCO also signals the significance of growing reliance and partnership. The economic, trade, technology, and energy cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad is becoming a priority for both countries. Since they have planned to enhance their economic trade that was mere US \$ 800 million in 2018,²⁴ Russia has pledged to finance various connectivity projects to strengthen their bilateral relations with Pakistan.²⁵

Conclusion

The above discussion gave an overview of Russia's foreign policy readjustments towards South Asia, especially in the post-Crimea annexation era. Since Russia's stumbling relations with the West (2014), it is prepared to withstand and counter economic pressure and political isolation in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives at the global level. Russia would no longer follow the lead of western powers, instead position itself as a Great Power, contributive towards the development of a multipolar world as an alternative to US-led Eurocentric unipolar world order. In contemporary international relations, Russia's readjusted multilateral diplomacy and enhanced participation in global affairs as a responsible state are contributing much to building a peaceful and prosperous world.

In South Asia, the core components of the Russian policy toolkit have withstood the test of time and there are indications that it will continue to rely on them in the post-Putin era as well. Russia is pursuing an evolving strategy in its foreign policy orientation under President Putin, which has facilitated realignment in its diplomatic, economic and military relationships across the region. Russia is determined to seek a peaceful solution in Afghanistan, eliminate terrorism and extremism, promote socio-economic development, enhance trade, and maintain peace and security in the region. However, India's radical approach in toeing US policy-line in Asia-Pacific and continuous interference in the Afghan peace process are foremost irritants for Russian diplomacy in the region. Russia is very much conscious about the destructive influence of the Indo-US military and strategic partnership against China and Pakistan (in the case of BRI-CPEC), thus, revamping its foreign policy options in South Asia.

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