



## IS RUSSIA MENDING ITS TIES WITH PAKISTAN AT INDIA'S COST?

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The first half of the year 2014 seems to have been an eventful period for Russia as Moscow hogged the limelight over the Ukraine imbroglio and now has drawn attention for its oscillating foreign policy behaviour in the South Asian region. The lifting of embargo on weapons sale to Pakistan is being interpreted as a setback for India as the decision comes in the wake of India being the largest importer of Russian defence equipment and its virtual support to Russia over the Crimean crisis. The paradigm shift by Russia makes it imperative to investigate the determinants that may result in intense repercussions on India – Russia bi-lateral ties.

Russia's big swing towards India during the Cold War and Pakistan's eventual membership of Western security alliance to acquire substantial economic and military aid during this period was a litmus test for both the countries. In April 1968, the visit of Russian Premier Kosygin to Pakistan resulted in the announcement of a limited quantity of arms supply to Pakistan. However, the military aid to Islamabad amounted to only \$5-10 million as against \$600-700 million arms assistance to India.<sup>1</sup> The rapprochement between Washington and Islamabad on the other hand was a major cause of concern for Russia.

However Pakistan experienced a wave of anti-American sentiment following the Oct 1990 suspension of \$576 million in economic and military aid by the U. S. government following the implementation of Pressler Amendment and its refusal to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty.<sup>2</sup> Since then Pakistan has been struggling to cope with its defence needs and find reliable defence markets. Relying on western defence markets like France

and Britain was an expensive affair while Russia saw Pakistan with suspicion especially after its role in Afghanistan war with the Soviets.

It is crucial to understand why Russia has tried to mend its relations with Pakistan in recent times even if it comes at the cost of its relations with India. To begin with, the recent developments in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions by the West have impacted Russia's economy adversely. In an effort to pursue its economic growth, Moscow has shifted its focus to a more secure market- South Asia. The recently concluded \$400 billion gas supply deal with China, Russia still being the largest supplier of defense equipment to India and now the sale of weapons to Pakistan is a case in point.

Moreover, Russia is apprehensive of the situation in Afghanistan post the scheduled withdrawal of US troops this year. It fears that the Taliban which is in resurgent mode with rise of fundamentalism<sup>3</sup> may turn to a potential zone for widespread terrorism not only in Afghanistan but also in the vulnerable Central Asian Republics. Russia has been susceptible to terror attacks as in the case of Chechnya and the December bombings in Sochi. Hence, Moscow does not want to leave any stone unturned in order to insulate its own backyard.

Since the events of 9/11, Pakistan has adopted a proactive and pragmatic approach in its foreign relations that helped Islamabad to stage a diplomatic comeback at regional and global levels. Russia has acknowledged Pakistan's role in the war on terrorism and its endeavors to create a stable regional environment following the end of Taliban regime and a change in Pakistan's Afghan policy<sup>4</sup>.

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This removed the hindrance in revamping the relations between Moscow and Islamabad, thus gave an important leverage to Russia in the post-2014 Afghanistan withdrawal.<sup>5</sup>

Another important aspect is the growing proximity of New Delhi with Washington and the diversification of its defence markets. Despite strong defence ties, during the last several years Russia has lost Indian military tenders worth upto \$13 billion.<sup>6</sup> India is currently United States largest defence markets jumping 23 places in a period of one year.<sup>7</sup> Israel and France are the other potential defence markets that India has pursued. With India diversifying its defence markets and Chinese defence orders started to fall off owing to the growing capability of its own defence industry,<sup>8</sup> it is important for Russia to find defence customers to fund its mammoth defence industrial complex. Hence, knowing Pakistan's urge to upgrade its defence equipments and need for reliable defence market; geographic diversification of defence export destination has led Russia to lift arms embargo on Pakistan.

While Moscow's move to sell weapons to Pakistan is perceived emotionally by India as an act of betrayal, however, the move should not actually have come as a surprise since Russia has the prerogative to diversify its defense markets. Last year Russia finalized a deal with China for sale of 48 aircrafts of Sukhoi Su35. India must, of course, persist in communicating its security concerns to Russia and invoke special relationship the two have historically enjoyed. The bilateral relationship is still far more stable and less volatile despite the hiccups in the defense co-operation. The decision of Russia to provide India access to signal from Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) is in itself proof of Russia being the most dependable partner as it is far more willing to share military technology than the Western suppliers. It is also relevant here to understand that India was given the license to indigenously manufacture defense equipments with Russian assistance. Therefore, India has more leverage in terms of its relations with Russia than Pakistan as it shares better camaraderie and mutual trust than its Asian counterpart. However, both sides will have to work at sustaining the specialness of the relationship.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)*

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Adnan Ali Shah, "Pakistan- Russia Relation: Post-Cold War Era", [www.issi.org](http://www.issi.org)
- <sup>2</sup> Susan B Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra, "Pakistan Re-evaluates its U.S. Ties after Pressler Amendment Aid Cutoff", EIR Volume 17, Number 48, December 14, 1990 pg. 49
- <sup>3</sup> Rajeev Sharma, "Why is Russia Lifting Embargo on Military Supplies to Pakistan?", Russian Times, 2 June 2014. Source: <http://rt.com/op-edge/163116-russian-embargo-military-supplies-pakistan/>
- <sup>4</sup> Fazal-Ur- Rahman, "Pakistan's Evolving Relations with China, Russia, and Central Asia", [http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16\\_1\\_ses/11\\_rahman.pdf](http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/11_rahman.pdf) pg. 211
- <sup>5</sup> Sharma, 2 June, 2014.
- <sup>6</sup> Arup Roychoudhary, "Factbox-Russia and India's Defence Ties", 24 December 2012. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-12-24/business/sns-rt-india-russiadefence-factboxl4n09v1zr-20121224\\_1\\_defence-ties-admiral-gorshkov-medium-lift-helicopters](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-12-24/business/sns-rt-india-russiadefence-factboxl4n09v1zr-20121224_1_defence-ties-admiral-gorshkov-medium-lift-helicopters)
- <sup>7</sup> "India Becomes US's Largest Defense Market - IHS Balance of Trade Study", February 26, 2014. <http://press.ihs.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-terrorism/india-becomes-uss-largest-defense-market-%E2%80%93-ihs-balance-tra>
- <sup>8</sup> Sergey Denisentsev and Konstantin Makienko, "The Arms Trade Treat and Russian Arms Exports: Expectations and Possible Consequences", *Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies*. Pg. 8 [www.unidir.org](http://www.unidir.org)