
Russia's strategic hedging in South Asia

"I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest".

- Winston Churchill, 1939.

80 years after the utterance of these words, following the end of the Cold War and transition from Soviet Union to Russian Federation, Kremlin remains shrouded in nebula in respect to its foreign policy and long-term goals, leaving political analysts, scholars and statesmen in query what will be the Eurasian power's next manoeuvre. Yet, as Churchill's phrase reverberates the simple truth of today, Russia's motivations are dictated by its national interests.

Russia's relations with the countries of South Asia further illustrate this phenomenon, with various alliances and oppositions converging and diverging across time. With the change of the Soviet hammer and sickle flag to the current tricolour, Moscow's interests in its immediate neighbours and neighbourhood have eminently changed. Therefore, this paper will outline the historical background of Russia's relations with the countries of South Asia, more specifically India and Pakistan. It will further provide a narrative of its relationship with the two contemporary superpowers – United States (US) and China. The paper will follow the course of events by comparing Kremlin's policy towards the aforementioned countries, before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, analysing the ensuing geopolitical paradigm shifts in Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan and China. It will also explain how Russia is currently establishing itself as a regional power, which successfully sustains positive relations with both India and Pakistan, despite their 70-year long conflict over the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir. The Sino-Russian alliance will be further analysed in respect to whether it opportunely acts as a hedge against Western influence and Russia's current role in the US-Taliban peace talks will be also examined alongside with the phenomenon of Islamist extremism in Russia, particularly in regards to its links to terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan, highlighting Russia's growing interest in building ties with the Muslim world as a safeguarding mechanism to its own domestic terrorism. In conclusion, this paper will argue that Russia's growing influence in South Asia should not be neglected considering its economic, military, political and cultural power and opportunity to fill the gaps left out by Washington's tumultuous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Introduction

The Russian Federation is a transcontinental country, which spans from Eastern Europe to Northern Asia and dominates over the Arctic. Occupying more than 17 million sq km, it is the largest country in the world by land area, constituting roughly one-eighth of the Earth's entire land surface. According to Russia's Federal Statistic Service, as per 2019, the current population stands at around 146.8 million, which makes Russia the ninth most populous country in the world; yet, its distribution is extremely uneven – up to 70% of its population live in the European part, which accounts for around 20% of its total size. The Russian Federation is home to more than 200 different ethnic groups and indigenous

peoples, yet, as the 2010 national census declares, 81% of the population considers themselves ethnically Russian. Furthermore, Russian is the most geographically widespread language on the Eurasian continent, as well as the most widely spoken Slavic language.

The country crosses eleven time zones, has coasts on three oceans (Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic), and incorporates a wide variety of landscapes. From northwest to southeast, Russia shares land borders with Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia and North Korea. In addition to that, it shares two maritime borders – with Japan via the Sea of Okhotsk and the US through the Bering Strait. Its vast territory is determinant for the country's abundance of mineral and energy resources – it has the largest proven natural gas reserves in the world, which makes it the biggest exporter of natural gas. Alongside with the export of oil and precious metals, Russia largely relies on its energy revenues to maintain its economy. In addition to that, the country has highly sophisticated defence industry, turning it into one of the most strategically important players in the international arms market; Russia is the second largest exporter of high-tech military equipment after the US, with an annual turnout of around \$15 billion. Currently its biggest and most loyal customers remain China and India.

The country is a nuclear-weapon State, and together with the US, possesses 90% of the world's stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. Russia is also a member of numerous supranational and inter-governmental organisations and it has a permanent member seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), alongside with being one of the founding fathers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Indo-Russian Relations

During the Cold War, the relation between India and the Soviet Union has been considered outstanding owing to its cordial political, economic, cultural, diplomatic and military ties. The Indo-Soviet liaison has been characterised by its legacy of trust, mutual interests, cooperation and enduring peace.

The growing bonhomie between the US and Pakistan, manifested through Pakistan's enrolment in the US sponsored South East Asian Trade Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) in 1955, became great concern for both India and the Soviet Union, drawing them closer together. The Indo-Soviet relationship was officially inaugurated with the visit of the then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the Soviet Union in June 1955, and then-First Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev's return visit to India in the fall of 1955. In 1955, the USSR made it unequivocally clear that the Soviet stance on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir has always been in favour of India, arguing that it is a sovereignty matter, inscribed in the Indian Constitution, as a result of the signing of the Instrument of Accession. Yet, during the Brezhnev era, the Soviet policy on Jammu & Kashmir changed, with Kremlin seeking and pursuing rapprochement between India and Pakistan in order to promote the peaceful coexistence of both countries under the aegis of its own leadership. And indeed, in 1966, the USSR acted as a mediator between Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistani military Dictator Muhammad Ayub Khan in signing the Tashkent Declaration, which signified the cessation in fire between India and Pakistan after their second war over Jammu & Kashmir in the summer of 1965.

By the end of the 1960's, the Soviet Union emerged as the biggest provider of military and defence equipment to India, alongside with being its second largest trade partner. In 1971, under the Brezhnev leadership, the integrity and tenacity of the Indo-Soviet strategic partnership was further manifested

through the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, which was the prelude to the crucial Soviet support for India in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 that led to the establishment of Bangladesh as a sovereign State.

The enduring relationship between the two countries further withstood the domestic political developments in the Indian government, which in the following years saw the rise of the rightist Janata Party's coalition government, which openly opposed the 1971 Treaty. In the 1980's, the Indira Gandhi's government's standpoint on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan also appeared rather sympathetic, with refraining from calling the immediate cessation of armed intervention in Afghanistan at the UN General Assembly.

Thus, the Cold-War era witnessed the two countries growing stronger together through serving their mutual interests, enhancing their economic and military capabilities and silencing the criticism of outside parties. As the successor State of the USSR, the Russian Federation inherited the very same close ties with New Delhi, yet since the collapse of the Soviet Union was a landmark shift in international politics, unsurprisingly the Indo-Russian bilateral relation experienced certain changes.

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, Russia struggled in formulating its South Asia policy, as the country was still caught up in a transition period and was mostly orientated towards forging relation with its former Western adversaries. It was only when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the relationship with India was put on the forefront of Russia's foreign policy. The signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership by India and Russia in 2000, commemorated both countries' adherence to their collaboration and joint efforts in the field of peace, security, politics, defence, counter-terrorism strategy, nuclear energy, technology, space, and economics. At that time, Russia's endeavours were primarily oriented towards its violence-ridden region of Chechnya, where Islamic militancy and terrorism have been contaminating the area since the early 1990's. The alleged involvement of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in providing military support and training to Chechen rebels additionally strengthened the determination of both Russia and India to work together on combating growing terrorism in their respective administered regions of Chechnya and Jammu & Kashmir. As Putin addressed the Indian Parliament in October 2000:

"...The same terrorist organizations, extremist organizations, are organizing and, very often, the same individuals participate in organizing, in conducting and igniting terrorist acts from the Philippines to Kosovo including Kashmir, Afghanistan and Russia's Northern Caucasus".

Martin Malek, Researcher at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management of the National Defense Academy in Vienna, Austria, argues that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been deeply concerned about the radicalization of Russian Muslims, particularly those from the former Central Asian Republics, in Pakistani religious schools, who upon their return spread the Wahhabist ideology. As he explains, Kremlin has approached Islamabad on numerous occasions, yet Pakistan in return has '*defended*' itself by stating that the schools were not run and funded by the State but by outside parties such as Saudi Arabia.

In December 2002, during a meeting in New Delhi with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Russian President urged Pakistan to abandon its support for terrorist groups, which orchestrate terror attacks in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir, and called for Islamabad to dismantle their terrorist infrastructure. At the end of the meeting, Russia and India signed a memorandum of understanding which stipulated the close partnership of the two countries in the field of counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, security, defence and a wide gamut of economic and technological ventures.

Earlier the same year, Moscow attempted to act as a mediator between the years-long South Asian rivals, by inviting the Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for a joint meeting in order to defuse tensions in the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir, yet the two nuclear-armed neighbours eventually renounced the mediation effort. As of today, Kremlin also seems to have ruled out any future mediation in the conflict. This is particularly visible from the country's standing regarding New Delhi's decision of 5 August 2019 to revoke Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian Constitution which provided a special status, the State Subject Rule, to the people from the Indian Administered part of Jammu & Kashmir. Moscow argued that India's move to change the status of Jammu & Kashmir alongside with dividing it into two union territories is an internal matter. Russia further stood by its previous claims that a resolution to the Jammu & Kashmir conflict should take place in consultation with the Shimla and Lahore accords.

Indo-Russian Military & Defence Cooperation

In 2010, Moscow and New Delhi further augmented their relationship to a “*Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership*”, and currently Indo-Russian co-operation in the field of trade of military equipment constitutes one of the most important features in its bilateral ties, considering the high technological demands of India's defence sector. Yet, Indo-Russian defence cooperation is no longer limited to the previous supplier-client relationship, as it has progressively evolved to a much more complex defence industrial collaboration, which promotes and fosters the joint research, development and production of military hardware. The two countries have an institutionalized framework that supervises the wide spectrum of features in respect to their defence cooperation. The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) is the main body that oversees the affairs at the governmental level between both countries, and its body on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC), is the pillar of this framework.

The two Defence Ministers meet annually, alternately in Russia and India, for the purposes of reviewing and assessing the status of the ongoing projects and any other issues related to defence cooperation. Joint exercises of the two countries' Army, Navy and Air forces are also regularly conducted. Currently India and Russia conduct multiple joint military programs including the BrahMos cruise missile programme, the 5th generation fighter jet programme, the Sukhoi Su-30MKI programme, the Ilyushin/HAL Tactical Transport Aircraft, the KA-226T twin-engine utility helicopters and various guided-missile frigates.

In addition to that, New Delhi has purchased/leased various military hardware from Russia, including the Kamov Ka-226 200 utility helicopter and the T-90S Bhisma battle tanks, which are both planned to be made in India; the Akula-II nuclear submarine (leased with an option to buy when the lease expires); the INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier programme; the Tu-22M3 bombers; an \$900 million upgrade of MiG-29; Mil Mi-17 helicopters; Ilyushin Il-76 Candid multi-purpose four-engine turbofan strategic airlifter and the infamous S-400 Triumph defence system. The latter is considered the latest state-of-the-art, most powerful and lethal long-range air defense missile system in the world.

By signing the \$5 billion S-400 Air Defence Missile deal with Russia in 2018, India demonstrated its commitment to the relationship with Kremlin, despite threat of sanctions on behalf of the US under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The recent US termination of its preferential trade status assigned to India further signified that the growing US-Indo relationship, which has been primarily based on weapons acquisition and commercial trade, has never been a threat to Moscow and New Delhi's strategic alliance.

What has also become visible is that the relationship between the US and India, which was driven by the rise of China, has in recent months displayed some tensions. Although, the US-Indian strategic economic partnership is considered strong despite the challenges displayed, Trump's provocative and unilateral actions against New Delhi vis-à-vis the latter's relations with long-term partners such as Russia, not only could drift India further away from the US, but could also portray an image of America as a quarrelsome and unreliable partner – an attitude which has been historically exhibited with its on-and-off engagements with Pakistan.

As Vinay Kaura, Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan further warns in an article for *The Diplomat*:

“Hyper-nationalism and a combative approach has fundamentally defined the motivational structure of Modi’s foreign policy. Therefore America’s narrowly-conceived actions may revive the dormant tendency in India’s diplomatic establishment for the vigorous pursuit of ‘strategic autonomy’”.

Therefore, in the contemporary multipolar world, it is of utmost importance for international power players to recognise the necessity of maintaining multi-vector foreign policies and thus collaborate with the rest of the globe on economic, military and security matters. The recent rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan, which had unsurprisingly triggered Indian fears and apprehensions, should be perceived through the balance of power principle, which Moscow is at present implementing in the region of South Asia; likewise, India's relationship with the US does not jeopardise its dealings with Russia.

Russia's South Asian balancing strategy is further displayed through the cementing of partnerships with Pakistan's 'all-weather friend' China, despite the latter's historically volatile relations with New Delhi. Hence, the following sections will further provide a historical overview of Kremlin's relationship with Pakistan and China respectively, and analyse the implications stemming from these newly formed power blocks vis-à-vis the future of the South Asian region and Russia's national interests.

Pakistan – Russia relations

The Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan first established their diplomatic bilateral relations on 1 May 1948. Since the very inception of their ties, Pakistan was part of the US-led anti-Soviet alliance, which was manifested through its membership to the US-backed Baghdad Pact (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which both aimed at containing the Soviet Union and installing anti-communist defence treaties. Although attempts were made to warm up the relationship at the time of the signing of the Tashkent Declaration, the USSR's support for India during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war – both militarily and diplomatically at the UNSC –, rattled Islamabad. Nevertheless, in the following years, under the democratic government of then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the relationship witnessed a fundamental paradigm shift, particularly after Bhutto relieved Pakistan from SEATO and CENTO, weakening its relation with the US under President Jimmy Carter. The Soviet-Pakistani ties significantly strengthened under the diplomatic clout of Bhutto, who succeeded in persuading Moscow to contribute to the establishment of the Pakistan Steel Mills Corporation, which till present day remains Pakistan's largest industrial mega-corporation. Yet, the bonhomie between the two countries was short-lived when in 1977 the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) allegedly orchestrated a *coup d'état*, where Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq removed Bhutto from power and got him executed two years later.

Islamabad's role as a conduit for the armament and training of *mujahideen*, which were favoured by the Pakistani regime, under the CIA's *Operation Cyclone* against the Soviet Union during the latter's 10-year war in Afghanistan, further exacerbated tensions and extinguished any chances for rapprochement between the USSR and Pakistan in the following years. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia faced another threat – the rise of extremist Muslim movement in Afghanistan, the Taliban, which took control over Kabul and was seen as posing direct danger to Russia's soft underbelly in Central Asia. Thus, Pakistan's recognition of the Taliban-controlled government as the legitimate authority further hampered the then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's attempts to warm up the relationship.

The late 1990s experienced some additional setbacks for Moscow's sentiments towards Islamabad. Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons was seen as posing an acute danger towards the prospects of a nuclear Armageddon in the Indian subcontinent between the two undeclared nuclear power-neighbours. The subsequent 1999 Kargil War further consolidated the position of Moscow that a solution to the Jammu & Kashmir conflict and improvement of the Indo-Pak relations is imperative to the peace and stability of the entire Asian continent. In a joint-communiqué with the Indian government, the Russian Federation reiterated *"the importance of Islamabad implementing in full its obligations and promises to prevent the infiltration of terrorists across the Line of Control into the State of Jammu and Kashmir and at other points across the border, as well as to eliminate the terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan controlled territory as a prerequisite for the renewal of the peaceful dialogue between the two countries to resolve all outstanding issues in a bilateral framework as envisaged in Simla Agreement of 1972 and the Lahore Declaration of 1998"*.

Nevertheless, despite the ongoing regional conflicts, on bilateral level, the then-Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, attempted to warm up the relationship with Russia through economic and trade initiatives. During his visit to Moscow in April 1999, he succeeded in breaking the ice through signing an agreement on trade and economic cooperation, which provided that both parties grant each other non-discriminatory treatment on taxes, customs and method and transfer of payments. Hence, Pakistan and Russia gave each other the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN). The October 1999 coup against the democratically elected Sharif by the Pakistani Military establishment, which Moscow officially condemned, turned all these efforts into dust.

As Dmitri Trenin, Director of Carnegie Moscow Center has argued, *"the 1999 coup in Islamabad was the final straw. Russia's leaders saw an extremist Islamic regime, backed by a military junta with nuclear weapons, poised to subvert former Soviet states and Muslim enclaves in the Russian Federation itself"*.

The Russians were further concerned by the military regime's relations with extremist and militant groups. Islamabad's flirtation with Chechen leaders was particularly upsetting for Kremlin. In the beginning of 2000, the Russian Foreign Ministry condemned Pakistan for welcoming former President of the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev. As the Pakistani newspaper, *The Express Tribune*, has confirmed:

"Pakistani security agencies incorrectly took on Russia by encouraging the Taliban to accept a Chechen poet-statesman and ex-president of the breakaway Islamic republic, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, as a roving ambassador in Afghanistan. This was followed by extensive visits by Zelimkhan in Pakistan, where he went around meeting prominent religious leaders and outfits busy fighting Pakistan's covert war".

Realising the gravity of breaking off diplomatic relations with Russia, General Pervez Musharraf reportedly sent him away immediately, promising that any future cases of representatives of Chechen separatists in Pakistan will be dealt with accordingly by handing them over to Russia.

The relationship between Kremlin and Islamabad witnessed improvement only after the 9/11 terrorist attack, when Pakistan decided to join America's "war on terror" to hunt down Al Qaeda and its terrorist fractions, and thus, officially, denounced the Taliban government in Kabul. The defeat of the Taliban acted as a trampoline for Russian interests in the country, and the visit of Gen. Pervez Musharraf to Moscow in 2003 further paved the way for the two countries' rapprochement and strategic partnership.

During the subsequent years Russian and Pakistani officials progressively embarked on State visits aimed at enhancing the two countries cooperation on economic, technological and defence projects. Yet, Moscow's newly established relationship with Pakistan must be analysed through the context of the political landscape of the region. First, during the Cold War, Kremlin tended to perceive Pakistan through the prism of the latter's allegiance to the US and its animosity with USSR's ally, India; however, as part of today's post-Cold War global political paradigm of multipolarity, Russia has recognised the importance of Islamabad's strategic location, which virtually acts as a bridge between the Middle East, Central and South Asia and therefore creates favourable conditions for collaborating on interconnectivity projects as well as defence technology. Second, following America's announcement of the US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, building relations with Pakistan appears indispensable considering the country's essential role in the peace talks with the Taliban owing to Islamabad's close relations with their leadership. And third, Russia has demonstrated its aspirations to establish itself as a stabilizing force and regional economic and military hegemon in the Indian subcontinent, thus necessitating positive relations with the countries in South Asia, particularly with Pakistan and India.

Pak-Russian Military & Economic Cooperation

The year of 2014 turned out to be a milestone in regards to defence cooperation between the two countries as Moscow lifted its embargo on selling defence equipment to Islamabad. In 2015, the two countries also signed a landmark defence agreement that included a \$153 million deal sale of Mi-35 'Hind E' attack helicopters to Pakistan, as well as an agreement of purchasing the Klimov RD-93 engine from Russia so that Pakistan can domestically manufacture its JF-17 fighter jet. However, the timing was not accidental – international sanctions imposed on Russia due to the latter's annexation of Crimea, forced the Eurasian power to search for new export clients.

The first Russia-Pakistan counter-narcotics exercise was held in October 2014 followed by a second exercise in December 2015. In September 2016, the first ever joint military exercise between the two countries, titled 'Druzhba' [Friendship] was held in Cherat, Pakistan's north-western Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, while during the following year, under the heading 'Druzhba-II', Pakistani and Russian special forces launched their second joint military and counter-terrorism training in the mountains and forests of Russia's North Caucasus republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia.

Enhancement of trade, energy, technology and economic cooperation with Pakistan is also a major point on Russia's agenda. Currently Kremlin is financing various energy connectivity projects, such as the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000), which will allow for the export of surplus hydroelectricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2015, Russia further provided \$2 billion for the building of the 1100 km North-South gas pipeline from Lahore to Karachi. As Alexey Dedov, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Pakistan explains, this project is

expected to be *“a big step towards Pakistan’s self-sufficiency in energy”*. The project will welcome Russian technological equipment and materials, as well as Russian research, design and construction companies. In 2017, the two countries further strengthened their cooperation in this sector by signing the Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Liquefied Natural Gas Supplies. In 2018, the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Oil and Gas Company Limited signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian companies Himmash Apparat and Orpheus Energy, for the purposes of establishing an oil refinery in Kohat. In the beginning of 2019, the Russian energy giant, Gazprom, signed with the Pakistani Inter-State Gas Systems, a provisional agreement on the establishment of a pipeline from Iran to Pakistan and India; yet, considering the delicate geopolitical landscape in both the Middle East and South Asia, it remains to be seen whether the envisioned project will live up to its initial expectations.

Despite Russia’s numerous infrastructural and energy endeavours in Pakistan, Kremlin has remained sensitive to the plight of New Delhi and has eloquently made it clear that its dealings with Islamabad will be pursued with full transparency in order to alleviate any Indian concerns and maintain its balance of power in the region. In regards to its South Asia strategy, India has always trumped first in the eyes of Moscow. This was visible from the cancellation of Putin’s State visit to Pakistan in 2012, when he decided to first visit New Delhi and therefore sent his Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov instead. During their first joint military exercise with Pakistan, Russia denied the initially proposed location of Gilgit Baltistan, since India rightfully considers it to be part of the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir, and the drills were held in Cherat instead. In a similar fashion, as analysed by Dr. Petr Topychkanov, Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and an expert on South Asia and Nuclear Proliferation, Russia remains very careful when investing in Pakistan, considering that a big lump of the ongoing energy and infrastructural projects are under the umbrella of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – Beijing’s pilot project of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) -, and since the CPEC goes through the disputed territory of Gilgit Baltistan, Kremlin has been very cautious bearing in mind India’s concerns, thus creating its own niche of investment projects and bypassing Chinese endeavours. Furthermore, ongoing rumours of Pakistan purchasing high-tech military hardware from Russia, such as Su-35 fighter jets and T-90MS battle tanks, remain not only unconfirmed but also highly unlikely in light of Moscow’s vital defence partnership with India.

Russia sees Pakistan as an important partner in the fight against extremist violence, organised crime and drug trafficking, however Moscow still has its serious concerns regarding Pakistan’s counter-terrorism operations, as the Kharotabad incident has portrayed. In May 2011, at a Frontier Corps checkpoint in the Kharotabad area of Quetta, Balochistan, four Russians and one Tajik citizen, who were mistakenly identified as Chechen suicide bombers, were killed by Pakistani Security Forces. The individuals were not armed, despite allegations of carrying grenades and suicide vests, and had shown no resistance to the security forces and were even about to surrender when they were shot down. As Vladimir Moskalenko, Former Head of the Pakistan Study Center at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences and Dr. Petr Topychkanov, examine the case study in a report published by Carnegie Moscow, the Pakistani law enforcement agents clearly used excessive force and thus Russia could not remain indifferent to the situation.

They further argued that although the aforementioned individuals were not implicated in any acts of terrorism, Moscow remains highly concerned of the phenomenon of Russian and post-Soviet republic citizens traveling to Pakistan for the purposes of receiving terrorist training or enrolling in madrassas. As Moskalenko and Topychkanov argue, *“in March 2013, when the Pakistani Taliban took over most of the Tirah Valley in North Waziristan, up to 3,000 foreigners, predominantly Chechens and Uzbeks, fought for the Talibs”*. They further stated that the issue is also exacerbated by the fact that Russia

often acts as a transit point for terrorists migrating from South Asia to Western Europe, and since the nexus between terrorism, illegal migration and organised crime is well-known, additional burden is put on security forces to combat this perilous triad.

Afghanistan's security quagmire

As analysed in [EFSAS Commentary of 16-11-2018](#), not long ago Russia embarked on a painstaking journey to overcome the distrust and antagonism it bore towards Pakistan and the Taliban in the interest of its larger objective of securing itself and its neighbourhood from the increase of Islamic extremism, while also emerging as the most acceptable intercessor for regional stakeholders. The country believes the Taliban has an imperative role in containing the spread of Islamic State in Afghanistan and consequently reaching its Central Asian underbelly. Moscow recognised that Pakistan, as the prime supporter and harbourer of the Taliban, was one of the major elements that needed to be humoured if any consequential talks with the Taliban were to be held in the war-torn country of Afghanistan. As a result, the Kremlin on 9 November 2018 organised a significant meeting of what has come to be termed as the Moscow Format of engagement aimed at finding a negotiated settlement to the decades-long violent conflict in Afghanistan. While this endeavour, as also many other attempts to sit across the table with the Taliban in search of the long-elusive peace in Afghanistan, have been welcome developments, the absence of insistence that the terrorist outfit eschew violence prior to ushering it onto the table does raise serious concerns.

In addition to that, despite Russia's expended time and efforts in jostling itself back into a position in which it could potentially re-emerge from its Soviet-era debacle in Afghanistan to once again have a prominent say in the Afghan narrative, Moscow's relationship with Kabul has been experiencing some serious blowbacks owing to the negotiations with the Taliban, since the legitimate Afghan government feels virtually bypassed and not involved in the pursuit of peace. The position of the Afghan government regarding the peace process is that it should be "*Afghan-owned, Afghan-led*". Therefore, if Russia really wants a solution that acts in favour of the Afghan people, the country needs to re-think its strategy and include Kabul, as leaving it out would be an impediment to the entire peace process.

On 25 April 2019, Moscow hosted a trilateral meeting together with US and China on the Afghan Peace talks, where the three superpowers reached a precedential consensus on settling a negotiating package with the Taliban. Yet, more importantly, the trilateral format showcased another international player with extensive influence that pays great attention to the evolving situation in Afghanistan, namely China. Visibly, the abrupt potential US troops withdrawal from the conflict-ridden country has rearranged the global political chess board, allowing for new power houses to contend for influence in the region, and paving the way for the creation of new allegiances. Although Beijing's historical economic and political involvement in Afghanistan has been rather limited, currently the Asian Dragon has recalibrated its strategy and interests in the country. Considering China's geographical proximity with Afghanistan, with whom it shares short (76 km), yet significant from a geopolitical perspective, border, Beijing has become particularly wary of the potential spill-over of Islamic extremism into its Muslim majority Xinjiang province where Beijing has been preoccupied in brutally crushing dissent among the Uyghur population. China's active engagement in Afghanistan is further triggered by Beijing's apprehensions that if it does not adequately addresses the political volatility and instability in Afghanistan, it could jeopardize its multi-billion dollar investments in its colossal Belt and Road infrastructural megaproject, which aims to connect China with the countries not only of South and of Central Asia, but the rest of the world.

Considering Beijing's substantial leverage over Pakistan, owing to its \$62 billion investments in the country as part of its CPEC project, which have virtually subjugated Pakistan economically and politically due to the heavy debts the South Asian State has already started to incur, it does not come as a surprise that Beijing is currently engaging more deeply with its neighbour as part of its Afghan strategy. A four-party meeting on the Afghan Peace Process was held in Beijing on 10-11 July 2019, during which the three superpowers China, Russia and the US welcomed Pakistan as an essential member at the negotiating table, while bearing different motivations for doing so.

The current presidential administration of the US might appear to believe that the increased pressure it has exerted on Islamabad to crack down on terrorist groups harboured in the country, is what is paying dividends now with Islamabad goading the Taliban to the negotiating table, yet the reality is quite the opposite. Quick to seize on US' prematurely stated desire to withdraw from Afghanistan, Pakistan's decision to facilitate the talks has more to do with the country's keenness to drive the US out of the region. In a similar fashion, America's current archenemies – Russia and China, appear to have gotten closer than ever, both expressing geopolitical aspirations for casting Washington's influence in South Asia away.

Russia-China relations

As Dmitri Trenin has described the recently observed growing harmonization in foreign policies between the two countries:

“China and Russia have learned lessons from history: great powers lead or abstain, they don't jump on the bandwagons of others, and in bilateral relations, great powers seek to maintain equilibrium-they may come close to each other if interests or circumstances demand, but not so close as to become followers”.

Historically the relation between People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, before the fall of the Soviet Union has been marked by mutual animosity, distrust and hostility. Although in the immediate years after the PRC was established, the USSR facilitated the country's path towards industrialisation and modernization, in the second half of the 1960s, the so-called Sino-Soviet Split or breaking of diplomatic relations took place, due to the disparity in doctrinal interpretation and practical implementation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which continued throughout the entire Cold War. Among the countries from the Eastern bloc, the Sino-Soviet split signified not only a clash in ideologies, but also a struggle determining which country will be considered the pioneer in championing the communist revolution across the globe.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, diplomatic relations between Russia and China dramatically improved. In July 2001, the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation was signed. The same year, one month earlier, the two countries together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – an inter-governmental political, economic and security alliance, that is currently at the forefront of formulating and enacting the Eurasian grand geo-political strategy, countering Western interference and influence. Although inaugurated on the basis of Beijing and Moscow's convergence of security interests in the region of Central Asia, the SCO has since then extended its membership to both India and Pakistan in 2017, signifying the Sino-Russian accumulation of strategic objectives in South Asia as well. That being said, considering that Russia supported India's membership into the SCO as a counterweight to China while Beijing responded by inducting its ally, Pakistan, a certain, yet uneasy, political equilibrium was achieved.

Nevertheless, as described in [EFSAS Commentary of 21-06-2019](#), currently the relation between the two countries finds itself at its apogee, with numerous exchanges of gestures of affection and friendship, negating any fears of a power struggle between Moscow and Beijing and illustrating how the growing bonhomie of the two could give more weight and potency to the SCO. In addition to that, the Sino-Russian economic cooperation has reached new heights, with 2018 witnessing bilateral trade exceeding \$100 billion, which could be largely explained with the current US trade war on China and Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia, which have instigated Beijing and Moscow cosying up to each other. China relies on Russia mostly for raw materials, such as wood and mineral fuels, and the export of gas energy through the establishment of numerous gas pipeline projects, while China's sales to Russia consist of predominantly electronics, machinery and equipment. In the military and defence sector, the two countries also appear particularly active, with the oftentimes mentioned as an example "Vostok 2018" large-scale military exercise, hosted by Russia and joined by China, advertised as the biggest war games for decades. Some of the military items sold to China by Russia, constitute the Sukhoi SU-35 combat aircraft, the world's top air defence systems, the S-400, and the Kamov KA-32 multirole helicopters.

Yet, as many analysts claim, the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship is bound to be asymmetrical, considering Beijing's larger economic capabilities and pursuit of domestic arms design and manufacturing. However, as far as Russian national interests are concerned, for the time being, Moscow will continue to be keenly interested in boosting its economy with the help of Beijing, while being careful of not becoming overly dependent. For Kremlin, the relationship with China is a convenient catchall for building its economic capabilities and countering Western influence in the region, yet the country remains alert of Chinese BRI-related strategic projects in Central Asia, which Russia considers under its sphere of influence. Similarly, although Moscow seeks to address the socio-economic problems in its resource-rich, yet highly isolated Siberian and Far East regions, many Russians are wary of Chinese investors, as they fear that the increased influx of cheaper Chinese labour hand, substantiated by the ongoing illegal Chinese migration, will hurt the employment prospects of the locals.

As a result, President Putin has been reaching out recently to India ahead of Prime Minister's Modi September visit to the Vladivostok Economic Forum, to promote its Far East region and balance out Chinese influence. As the *Economic Times*, an Indian daily, claims, in August 2019 the Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal will head a delegation of five BJP chief ministers to the remote region in order to explore opportunities for investment projects.

Conclusion

What becomes visible from these so-called Sino-Pak-Russian axis and US-Indian alliance, is that all parties have adopted '*hedging strategies*' towards one another in order to minimise any risks or adverse repercussions. In international relations, the term '*strategic hedging*' stands for the utilization of two contrasting policies on behalf of a State against another State in order to diminish any potential risks; a country could both cooperate – through building economic partnerships, maintain diplomatic relations and initiate joint projects, while it could also try to balance out the other country through building its military and defence capacities and forging alliances with its rivals.

In the current scenario for instance, despite India's intentions of building an enduring partnership with the US, the country remains sensitive and vigilant towards any lack of certainty and predictability in Washington's geopolitical manoeuvres, thus continuing to cater to its relationship with Moscow. Similarly, Russia is at present acting in the need of the hour by building bridges with all the major

players in South Asia, thinking ahead and seeking rapprochement in order to establish itself as a leading regional power; yet, Kremlin is aware that juggling with multiple balls cannot hold forever, hence, it is prepared to drop one when is the right time. Russia's decade-long cordial relationship with India is projected to remain unaltered in the face of those alliances, and Moscow and Delhi will continue to put their mutual interests first.

The world has already witnessed a transition from unipolar to a multipolar world. As Ume Farwa Azeemi, Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, has argued:

“A gradual rise of multipolarity is creating geo-strategic spaces for states to maneuver for their individual interests and, at the same time, opening new avenues of cooperation for shared geo-economic interests. This scenario is compelling states to adjust the undertones of their foreign policies and adapt to the transforming realities”.

The new paradigmatic shift of Russia's tilting towards China and Pakistan, while negotiating with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which ostensibly comes at the expense of its year-long partner India, should be seen through this angle.

Since its very inception, Russia has been chastened by its own geography; the country is almost entirely landlocked due to the absence of access to warm water ports, obstructing its prospects for international trade. The tremendously large territory, abundantly rich on natural resources which have indeed secured its self-sufficiency in terms of energy, has also made it very vulnerable since it is arduous to police, alongside with having a plain mountain-less Eastern border, which appears unprotected from Western invasion.

In the current capitalist geopolitical setup, where foreign relations are based on commodity exchange in order to accumulate wealth and influence, Russia has recognised the necessity of building its own capabilities with a competitive advantage in order to regain its status of a Superpower. Although, the country for long has been relying on its military defence image to exert dominion, a military establishment is ultimately dependent on its economic strength to grow and exert its international status; Moscow is now turning towards former rivals such as Pakistan and China for defence cooperation and trade, adopting a hedging strategy, by calibrating the potential constraints that are likely to emerge.

Russia's constructive multilateral relations with the countries of South Asia, manifestation of its soft diplomacy in the region, have opened the gates to its substantial regional influence, allowing Moscow to engage with vital new markets and act resolutely with the ongoing conflicts, while maintaining the role of a pacifying force. The country has little interest in replicating the role of the US, which currently faces a dramatic downhill in its regional supremacy.

Getting back to Churchill's words, Russia's current South Asian strategy should be seen less as a mystery and more as an opportunistic rational determination of filling the gap of the power vacuum left out by the US, in pursuit of its national interests.

