

## **Sino-Russo Strategic Synergy in International Politics and Emerging Contours of South Asian Equilibrium: An Indian Perspective**

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*The primary objective of this paper is to trace the shifting balance of power in favour of China in South Asia by examining the Sino-Russo entente. The trajectories of their strategic relations have gained momentum after the announcement of the 'Asia Pivot' and the unfolding of the Crimean crisis. As their synergy is currently changing the status quo of south Asian states, the paper has attempted to explore three main factors for the same. Moscow-Beijing-Tehran Axis; warming up of Russo-Pak ties and China's revival of the old silk route have been analysed to examine their respective consequences in altering the balance of power. Also, India's concerns have been addressed and some policy options have been discussed.*

**Keywords:** *China, India, Russia, Re-articulation, foreign policy*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Cooperation between Russia and China began in the early 1950s. However, from 1956 until the end of the 1980s, the relations between the two remained strained due to mutual distrust. In 1989, Soviet President Gorbachev undertook a four day visit to China for the first Sino-Soviet summit after their ideological and political split. In 1992, Yeltsin signed the 'Order of the Russian Federation's Relations with China' and acknowledged Beijing's 'One China Policy.' Consequently, in December 1992, the first Russo-China Summit was held wherein China gave the status of Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) to Russia. In 1994, the two countries agreed not to target each other with nuclear weapons. On July 16, 2001, the Presidents of China and Russia signed a treaty for Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation. In 2005, the two held their first joint military exercise. The merger of mutual interests was primarily due to the fact that both held animosity against the US.

During this fluid period of 1991 to 2010, Beijing and Moscow cooperated with each other at a political and diplomatic level, though both found it tough to overcome their historical mutual suspicions. This was evident in issues that adversely affected their bilateral political relationships such as the pipeline dispute wherein Russia wanted to exert its historical political control over the Central Asian pipelines that of course was not accepted by China and the Russian complaints against the Chinese of reverse engineering of the tactical arms supplies. This was reflected in their bilateral trade, which in 2009, declined by thirty one percent from \$56.8 billion to \$38.8 billion (Bin, 2010).

Russia was simultaneously seeking to carve out a place for itself in the Western system through gaining membership in institutions such as the G8, an informal grouping of the world's leading industrialized nations, and forming strategic partnerships with the United States, the EU, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Trenin, 2015). Other important platforms through which Russia cooperated were the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), and Partnership for Peace (PfP). The main objective of the Russian government in cooperating with the West was to make sincere efforts to overcome the

hostilities while also refocusing on domestic issues such as restructuring of the economy, securing its borders on its eastern side, etc.

It was at this juncture that the American experts were led to believe that a Sino-Russo alliance should not be their immediate concern, at least for another half a decade. The U.S. strategists also theorized that possibly, in the next few years, bilateral cooperation between Russia and China would decline due to their conflicting strategic interests, and that the U.S. could actually attempt to exercise its past influence and continue shaping the trends of international relations as per its whims and fancies despite its relative decline at the international level.

## 2. CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

Parallel developments from 1991-2010, brought both China and Russia to strategically embrace each other by putting aside their bilateral differences. At an international level, with the 2004 NATO's eastward expansion to include seven of Russia's neighbours, the latter was bewildered. It considerably upset Moscow. And from there on, beginning with Putin's first presidential term which saw the handling of the school hostage crisis by the Chechen militants, one witnessed a revival of 'nationalistic perspective' in the new Russian government, and this revival was also reflected in 'Russian resurgence.'

In 2007, Putin's policies were seen to produce conflict with the US, when he criticised the post cold war world order at the Munich Security Conference. In 2008, Russian peacekeepers were killed by Georgia in South Ossetia in the process of an attack on rebel enclave. In the same year, the Russian Prime Minister Medvedev signed an updated Foreign Policy Concept wherein Moscow was referred to as "one of the leading centers of the contemporary world and there was repeated mention of a new Russia" (Mankoff, 2009: 13). Developments such as NATO's declaration of a 'No Fly Zone' over Libya, rejection of the Russian proposal of a joint ballistic missile programme led Russia to believe that the U.S. was still harbouring Cold War suspicions and the cooperation from the U.S. was at a superficial level. Thus, in 2012, owing to these reasons, Putin ended the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. Finally, in 2014, due to the Crimean crisis, the U.S.-Russia relations became the focus of the world attention owing to its intensity. Foreign policy experts throughout the world voiced their concern that this was a revival of the Cold War. From here onwards, one can easily recall Russia's reinvigoration of its diplomacy and especially, with its ties to China, Iran and Iraq, and, in the contemporary period, with Syria. What we witness today is definitely not a temporary phenomenon; rather, Russia has taken almost a half a decade to overcome its strategic difficulties. The strategic policies under the guidance of Putin have now culminated in the 'Asian shift.'

As Moscow aspired to be recognised as an important player in international politics, it perceived China as a substitute or an alternate power that could be relied on to pursue its own agenda in the realm of international relations. In this direction, Bobo Lo (2009) opined that, "the dynamics between Russia and China is one of strategic convenience—an "axis of convenience". One of the primary reasons to re-focus on China was the military operation of the U.S. in Iraq and the increase in the number of bases around Russia. From an "axis of convenience" to a Sino-Russo entente, the developments in the last five years have drastically changed the contours of international politics, especially in South Asia.

As Russia has been an important player in South Asian international relations both through its formal and informal alliance with India, the changing contours of its foreign policy affects not only its immediate neighbourhood- Central Asia and other former republics, but also, a host of other countries too such as Turkey, Pakistan, and China.

From a Chinese perspective, it had strong reasons to “normalize” and renegotiate its relations with Russia. While speaking in this vein, Mankoff (2011) rightly argued that—

“the benefits to Beijing in seeking a closer partnership with Moscow are numerous: guaranteed supplies of oil and gas, diplomatic support in the UN Security Council and against the expansion of U.S. power in the Asia-Pacific region, availability of advanced military technology, and decreased tension along the Russo-Chinese frontier that allows Beijing to focus its attention on Taiwan and global challenges” (Mankoff, 2011: 184).

Also, during its early years of military transformations or build up, China had relied heavily on Russia. On the other hand Moscow, because of its dwindling economy, in particular its defence industrial complex had to search for new alternative markets and thus China was an obvious choice because of its political differences with the U.S. The arms trade statistics between Russia and China during this period prove that this was indeed the case. According to Yu-Shan Wu (2011)—

“China purchased \$15 Billion of Russian weapons from 1992-2005, representing about forty percent of Moscow’s overall arms sales. Between 2001 and 2006, the average arms sales from Russia to China were \$2.7 Billion, an unprecedented high. On China’s side, ninety five percent of arms imports were from Russia during the period 2000 to 2005” (Wu, 2015: 102).

Thereafter, China started reverse engineering Russian tactical arms and also simultaneously modernised its military. Though bilateral differences arose on this issue, it did not yet affect their strategic relations.

China indigenously surpassed the military technologies of the U.S. which included Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2/AD); DF-21/21A; building of Hainan underground naval base; induction of Chengdu J-20 stealth fighter plane. Simultaneously it adopted a strategy of ‘Gunboat Diplomacy’ towards its neighbours including India. All these developments called for an immediate shift in the U.S. strategic attention towards the South China Sea and Beijing.

The rise of China has undoubtedly resulted in a ‘Thucydides Trap’ in Sino-U.S. Relations whereby Beijing wants to challenge the various norms of international politics as established by the U.S. Consequently, in 2012, Asia Pivot policy was announced by the Obama administration to rebalance the Asian continent and to maintain the freedom of navigation not only in the South China Sea but also in the waters of ‘string of pearls’ i.e. Indian Ocean and Straits of Malacca. Beijing assessed the situation between the US and Russia, and, wasted no time to announce “Marching West” as a response to pivot to Asia. Yun Sun (2013), in her study has defined the contours of “Marching West”. As the U.S. attempts to hinder Beijing’s rise in East and South Asia, China should forge new strategic partnership and alliances and adopt the same policies vis-a-vis the U.S. Against this backdrop, Beijing went ahead in its decisions to “train, fund and equip” the Afghan police, and organized trilateral meetings with Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has further strengthened its strategic relations in the Middle East and in Africa.

### 3. SCOPE OF SINO-RUSSO STRATEGIC RELATIONS

From the perspective of trilateralism, differences of both countries with the U.S. remain an important component of their bilateral relations. In the post 9/11 period, they became more pronounced. Though the Sino-U.S. bilateral relations did find some convergence on particular issues of such as international terrorism, drug trafficking, etc., fundamental disagreements remain unresolved over trade imbalances and discriminatory trade policies. Others were issues of geostrategic nature such as cancellation of rare earth minerals export to Japan, demands of cancellation of the U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing's one-China policy and Senkaku Islands dispute in the South China Sea.

The same phenomenon was witnessed in the U.S.-Russian bilateral relations with different points of friction. NATO's expansion towards countries bordering Russia, its deepening relations with Ukraine and Georgia, its divergence on the issue of Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) in Eastern Europe, and its ambitions to strategically dominate Central and North-East Asia makes the two countries view each other as adversaries. Thus, both Russia and China intend to maintain their strategic leverage in Asia with the help of each other, and also by involving regional players such as Iran and Syria, who share common animosity towards U.S.-dominated world order.

The scope of the bilateral relations between Russia and China have included Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) within the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), arms, and energy transfers from Russia to China, enhancement of their bilateral trade amounting to ninety billion U.S. Dollars in 2013, consensus on building an anti-hegemonic world order based on multipolarity. Both have tried to use their strategic synergy to carve out a place for themselves in international politics.

At an international level, the synergy that this strategic partnership has created has been visible in the U.S. reluctance to take action against Assad when he supposedly crossed the 'red line'; on the Crimean crisis and the 400 billion USD gas supply deal between China and Russia. A joint statement issued after the May 2014 Sino-Russo summit declared that both countries seek to establish "a more just and equitable international order." All these developments that took place in the last few years have shifted the balance in favour of China and pose a diplomatic and strategic challenge to the West.

In the past three years, the Sino-Russo synergy has gained momentum because the U.S. has left no stone unturned to exercise its strategic control on both the powers, first, through exerting pressure on China through its Asia pivot policy, and second, by imposing economic sanctions on Russia in the wake of Ukrainian crisis. Under the Asia pivot policy, according to Logan (2013), Washington aims to increase its naval presence from the current 50/50 split between Atlantic and Asia-pacific to 40/60 respectively by 2020. On the other hand, Russia, because of the sanctions from the EU and the U.S. has tilted more in favour of China, and is strategically compelled to remain so. Most recently, during the June 2015 G7 summit, some of the countries voiced their demands for more stringent economic measures against Moscow. In turn, Beijing took a diplomatic initiative to openly criticise the G7 countries and stated "China has repeatedly reiterated its established position that it rejects constant threats and sanctions" (Sputniknews.com, 2015). And, it is on these common grounds and their mutual interests that both "China and Russia agreed on the integration and coordination of two mega projects i.e. China's Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union, which is led by Russia" (Shestakov and Gazeta, 2015).

In addition to this, both countries have held joint military exercises within the framework of the SCO. The 2005 and 2007 Peace Missions, the Peace Shield 2009, the 2010 antiterrorist exercise were held apart from the 2012 & 2013 joint naval exercises which further boosted their strategic proximity. Most recently they combined their synergy in “Joint-Sea 2015 I” drills in the Mediterranean Sea. The importance of this exercise lies in the fact that until now China did not reveal any strategic interests in the Mediterranean Sea, and its exercises were conducted either in the South China Sea or in the Yellow Sea. However, this exercise signalled Sino-Russo developing interests in the Mediterranean route because of Beijing’s attempts to revive the old silk route through its “One Belt, One Road” policy. According to Ernst (2014), there are reports that the two countries plan to conduct another naval exercise in the Pacific Ocean, thereby sending strong political and diplomatic signals to the West, especially the NATO members.

In the above context, the present study has examined the three most important factors that accounts for the changing geostrategic profile of South Asia in the contemporary times. The first being the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis which has created new strategic partnerships in India’s extended neighbourhood; second, the rapprochement of Russo-Pak ties, and third, China’s “One Belt, One Road” policy. All the three factors combined have altered the balance of power in India’s immediate neighbourhood. With both these neighbourhoods undergoing significant alterations, it has stirred a debate amongst the foreign policy decision makers in India, as to what should be the immediate and long term course of action so that India’s vital interests are not undermined.

### 3.1 Moscow-Beijing-Tehran Axis

After the end of the cold war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the international community witnessed the complete dominance of the U.S. in international politics, both, in terms of its military presence and its economic stature. Charles Krauthammer, in “The Unipolar Moment” (1990-91) remarked on operation ‘Desert Storm’ as “pseudo-multilateralism” as all the participating powers did not match the capabilities of the U.S., which was the major contributor. Both China and Russia are strongly advocating for a multipolar world. In this direction, both have joined hands and created a synergy that has become difficult for the U.S. and its allies to penetrate into. The first and the most prominent change that has taken shape is the forging of Moscow-Beijing-Tehran alliance.

As the US waged wars and encouraged colour revolutions in the Middle East, Chinese companies worked hand in glove with its foreign ministry, thereby bagging strategically important infrastructure and energy contracts. From the perspective of these countries, especially Iran which has been under regular sanctions since the Islamic revolution, China seemed to be a strategically lucrative country both in terms of a prospective trading partner as well as for geostrategic reasons. Russia looked towards these parallel developments as a ‘geo-strategic opportunity’ and to expand its defence arms supplies. Consequently, Moscow bandwagoned Beijing. Most recently, in April 2015, after the announcement of the Lausanne agreement between the western powers and Iran, “Russia has lifted its weapons exports ban to Iran and announced it will supply the S-300 missile system purchased in 2010” (Mustafa, 2015). This would definitely intensify the arms race in the Middle East, and most probably, would spread further to Pakistan and India. Thus, both China and Russia have intended to exploit the vulnerabilities that emerge for the U.S. through this trilateral relationship.

If one goes by the statistics, Iran is currently China's third largest supplier of crude oil, providing Beijing with roughly 12 percent of its total annual oil consumption (Global Research, 2015). On the other hand, "total annual bilateral trade between Iran and Russia in 2013 tripled over the past decade, but volume remained quite small. Russia accounted for about 1.8 percent of Iranian foreign trade volume, and Iran represented only 0.5 percent of Russia's" (Aliriza, Alterman and Kuchins, 2013: 13). "Russia mainly sells Iran nuclear technology, weapons, and wheat, while in return Iran exports food, oil products, and textiles" (Bushuev, 2013).

The recent developments in 2015 have increased the importance of Moscow and Tehran for each other. The "Oil for Goods" deal probably amounting to 20 billion US Dollars in which Iran will export around fifty thousand barrels per day in exchange of wheat, steel, and important machineries for the construction of relevant infrastructure will attempt to shift the balance of power in favour of Russia, and probably China, too. Already, supply of wheat to Tehran has been initiated. Also, under the agreement, Russia will provide Iran with the S-300 advanced missiles which can be used as a shield to Iran's nuclear facilities from a possible U.S. attack. This, would definitely undercut the effects of the West's sanctions on Iran, and quench Russia's demand for oil. Thus, both will benefit.

Experts on international politics spoke of strategic partnership between the three countries in terms of "a new geostrategic axis." In 2014, Russian president Putin in a speech at Sochi stated that "Russia, because of its military might, China because of its rising economic power and Iran because of its nuclear program" are being considered as the enemies of the U.S. (as cited in Taheri, 2014). Thus, a new type of cold war appears to be brewing in international politics. Along with this, a geographical crescent can be seen forming between Russia, Pakistan and Iran wherein, Pakistan has been recruited by Russia. From a Russian perspective, deepening of strategic relations with Pakistan can be seen as important because of two factors. First, against the backdrop of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan is being viewed as a key state to control extremism emanating from its borders. If the Islamic fundamentalists have to be brought into control, Islamabad undoubtedly has to be brought into confidence. And for this, it is important for Russia to 'strategically award' with some gains, maybe at the cost of friendship with India. Second, its geographic proximity with Tehran and the Iran-Pakistan pipeline factor is in the calculation of Russia's leadership. If there are increased chances that this pipeline will further go to Xinjiang, then for obvious reasons, Moscow would like to have it, too. And, for this, Russia has already started its rapprochement with Islamabad.

A Sino-Russo strategic hold in the Asian continent has compelled India in particular to seek economic cooperation with China despite its differences with it over the mapping issue and the boundary settlement issue. Beijing's aggressiveness can be well understood by the fact that during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Chinese news agency showed a faulty map of India while discussing his visit. As Beijing has already expanded its strategic influence, and in the process has belittled Indian outreach, geopolitical realities have compelled India to engage itself with the risen power.

The Beijing-Tehran strategic partnership at work is another cause of worry to India. Recently, the North Korean regime claims that it had successfully test-fired its first Hydrogen Bomb. This development has created a great hue and cry at an international level. This development not only threatens its immediate neighbours, such as South Korea and Japan, but will also constitute a security threat to the countries of South Asia, especially India. This development has the potential to escalate the existing fault lines in the Middle

East also. It has to be recalled that from North Korea, these sensitive technologies have been directed towards the Middle East wherein the trouble is being escalated because of the (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) ISIS. The issue of ISIS acquiring nuclear technology/ weapons, the Shia-Sunni divide and the geopolitics of the North Korean tests are intricately linked to each other. This issue needs immediate strategic attention because images of ISIS weapons lab showing construction of thermal batteries and heat seeking missiles have emerged worldwide. Further, on its part, China has always hesitated to take or advocate stringent measures against North Korea, thereby indirectly shielding not only the authoritarian regime in the North, but also, Pakistan's illegal nuclear network, along with Iran's nuclear programme.

### 3.2 Rapprochement of Russo-Pak Ties

Strategic engagement of Pakistan by Russia, with the help of China has already altered the status quo of South Asia. Keeping in mind that already China and Pakistan are declared "all weather friends", both have engaged Moscow as a policy to counterweigh India's strategic rise owing to its growing strategic proximity with the U.S. One can easily recall that Pakistan's international relations with South Asia and beyond was at the lowest point at the time of Kargil war, when it had to undergo diplomatic isolation due to its role in increasing the hostility with India. However, the tide has turned in its favour because of its response to the U.S. led 'War on Terror.' In 2004, it was designated as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) of the U.S. and became eligible for the foreign military financing that was previously denied to it. It is interesting to note that according to the Congressional Service Reports (CRS) on Pakistan authored by Epstein and Kronstadt (2015), a total of 3,305 Million Dollars of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) was received by Islamabad from 2002-2014. This amount excluded funds for International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Non-proliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining etc. Also, another study by the CRS brings to the surface the finer details of the military transfers to Pakistan. According to Epstein and Kronstadt (2013), some of the critical military transfers include; 100 Harpoon anti-ship missiles (worth \$298 million); F-16 armaments including 500 AMRAAM air-to-air missiles; 1,450- 2,000 pound bombs; 500 JDAM bomb tail kits for gravity bombs; 1,600 Enhanced Paveway laser-guided bomb kits, and gravity bombs (\$629 million).

In an attempt to balance this, China induced strategic engagement of Pakistan by Russia. The process was initiated in 2003 when President Musharaff had visited Moscow. This was the first ever high level bilateral visit since 1972. Ever since then, both countries have had important economic agreements and various talks between Russian company Gazprom and Pakistan's Oil and Natural Resources Ministry have discussed joint ventures.

Seen in a larger context, the most recent and defining features of this new upcoming strategic embrace have been Russia's attempts to woo Pakistan. First, this has been done at bilateral level and multilateral level by using the diplomatic platform of the Dushanbe summit that involved Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Second, its decision in 2014 to lift the arms embargo from Pakistan and supply Mi-35 attack helicopters runs along this policy. Third, in December 2014, both signed a landmark Military Cooperation Agreement. This agreement is critical because it includes a joint naval exercise between the two nations. On the other hand, in 2012, Russia through its strategic leverage influenced Tajikistan to deny the basing rights to Indian fighter planes in the Ayni base, despite India having spent \$1.1 million USD. Russia does not want foreign powers to deploy fighter aircraft in its 'strategic

backyard.’ The prospects for India having its strategic presence are dim in the background of the upcoming Afghanistan-Pakistan-Russia and Tajikistan axis” (Kaushiki, 2013a: 88). Despite the fact that India in the past had been a “traditional ally”, more favourable policies towards Pakistan, has altered the balance of power in the Indian subcontinent.

It is significant to note that this paradigm shift in the Russian arms sales policy is due to the reason that India too strategically tilted in favour of the U.S. In 2014, the U.S. had pinned Russia down as the largest arms supplier to India owing to the nature of its critical arms transfers to India. “The U.S. has bagged Indian defence deals worth almost \$10 billion since 2007-2008. The deals include ones for 12 C-130J ‘Super Hercules’ aircraft (\$2 billion), eight P-81 long-range maritime patrol aircraft (\$2.1 billion) and 10 C-17 Globemaster-III giant strategic airlift aircraft (\$4.1 billion) (Pandit, 2014). However, another stark reality of the defence arms supplies to India is that till 2014, Mocos continued to be one of the biggest arms suppliers, “grabbing about 75 percent of its weapons imports.” The remaining 25 percent is made up of the U.S. and Western European countries, particularly France, Britain, and Germany” (Sharma, 2014). Despite these statistics, Russia’s inclination towards Pakistan was completely unexpected by India. Since then, India is observing the developments in a very cautious manner.

All these decisions have sent strong signals of changing Russian priorities through Chinese influence. Undoubtedly, if all the Chinese ‘pearls’ of the strings are put together in place by connecting Gwadar, it can easily be concluded that the existing state of equilibrium, the status quo in South Asia and its vicinity regions i.e., Central and East Asia would be seriously disrupted. One should not forget how Islamabad combines nuclear blackmailing along with international terrorism as policies of statecraft against India, and on the other hand, plays a victim to the problem of terrorism. Though this duplicity is now being accepted by the West, and China, is well aware of it as well; yet, the influence of Beijing in influencing Russia in adopting favourable policies for Pakistan is continuing. Thus, the South Asian equilibrium is definitely affected, which will then compel India to adopt pro-West policies.

It is also interesting to note that India as a countermove held joint military exercise ‘Ajeya Warrior’ with the United Kingdom (U.K.) in June 2015. This first ever military exercise with the U.K. comes as a response not only to the joint Sino-Russo exercise, but also to the upcoming Russo-Pak exercise. On another front, India is also being geopolitically engaged by Japan and the US. In the past, India has held joint naval exercise with Japan which was code named as ‘Malabar,’ apart from a trilateral exercise with Japan and the US. Further, both India and Japan have signed a security agreement in 2008. India has also conducted similar exercises with both Singapore and Vietnam, and through this has gained access to the South-China Sea. Undoubtedly, these moves and countermoves have tremendously given a strategic stronghold to the Russo-Sino relations.

Apart from the above significant developments, another important dimension that is taking shape is the involvement of Pakistan in the newly proposed pipelines. Russia and Pakistan have signed a gas pipeline deal worth \$1.7 billion.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan is currently working on the pipelines i.e., the Gwadar pipeline and second, Karachi to Lahore (south pipeline) as an alternative to Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. In these projects, China and Russia are involved

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<sup>1</sup> “Pakistan, Russia sign \$1.7 billion gas pipeline deal, improve ties,” *The Economic Times*, Retrieved 7 July 2015, from [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-12-23/news/57349922\\_1\\_ip-gas-pipeline-russian-defence-minister-gas-development-company-limited](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-12-23/news/57349922_1_ip-gas-pipeline-russian-defence-minister-gas-development-company-limited).

respectively. Both countries are also involved in the negotiations to conclude \$2 billion Russo-Pak LNG pipeline from Karachi to Lahore (Bhutta, 2015). Apart from this there are also reports that Moscow had agreed to supply LNG to Islamabad and is supposed to commence by 2016.<sup>2</sup>

The leading examples towards this is recent Russo-Pak rapprochement by clinging the 'Military Cooperation' agreement, negotiating energy cooperation, and more importantly Russia downplayed Indian move for demanding condemnation against Pakistan for its dormancy regarding JuD & LeT at Brisbane anti-terror financing meet (Chaudhury, 2015). All these developments have raised concerns for India. These developments seem largely to be in response to India's tilt towards West particularly towards the U.S., and are largely affecting the balance of power in South Asia. Although India is considered to be South Asia's giant, as far as the current scenario is concerned it is Pakistan which is acquiring more benefits from the intense competition between the U.S. on the one side and China and Russia on the other side. This intense competition between these major powers has resulted in a win-win situation for Pakistan.

### 3.3 China's One Belt, One Road Policy and Revival of the Old Silk Route

The third most important development that affects South Asia are the attempts that China is making to revive the Old Silk Route. This initiative by Beijing has enhanced Islamabad's Geo-Strategic Profile by leaps and bounds. Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative was announced by the Chinese Premier in 2014. The SREB, along with the proposed Maritime Silk Road that connects the ports of the various countries (under the string of pearls), constitutes China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative. Under this overall initiative, President Xi established the 'Silk Road Fund' with 40 billion USD. This was in addition to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in which China contributed 50 billion USD. It is evident that Beijing's overall diplomacy is to couple the economic and security realm together. The first step in this direction would be to link up the road routes and the maritime routes apart from the extension of the old silk route.

Beijing has already built its ports under the 'string of pearls' policy in very strategic locations that include Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Connecting both the land and sea routes will have larger strategic consequences, which will bring a big change in the South Asian region, including the status of not just China, but also Pakistan, and India, in the longer run.

China has made the first investment from AIIB fund in the Karot hydropower project; yet, the most recent Chinese plan of investing 46 billion USD in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would prove a game changer for the South Asian region on its completion. As per the agreement, it includes a 2,000 mile transportation corridor of roads, railways and pipelines that would connect Xinjiang province by passing through Kashgar and would go down to Gwadar by passing through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Consequently, New Delhi because of the larger interests would be strategically pressurized, as witnessed in the recent developments such as the Pathankot attack, to continue to hold bilateral talks despite the Modi Government's stance that "terrorism and talks cannot go together."

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<sup>2</sup> "Russia to Finance a \$2 billion LNG Pipeline in Pakistan," *Oil & Gas 360*, Retrieved 7 July 2015, from <http://www.oilandgas360.com/russia-to-finance-a-2-billion-lng-pipeline-in-pakistan>.

From an Indian perspective, the very fact that PoK remains a disputed territory between India and Pakistan, of which India considers its own 'sovereign territory' occupied during the 1947 war, India is bound to feel "vulnerable." Second, Experts opine that the Kashgar-Gwadar rail road project will not only connect China with the Middle East and African countries in a much better way, but also attempt to integrate Pakistan diplomatically by raising its geo-political profile in South Asia and beyond. These two factors would indeed be detrimental to India's interests.

Third, Islamabad's strategic hold in Baluchistan will strengthen all the more with the presence of the Chinese investments and its related security arrangements. Thus, the possible creation of Baluchistan as a separate state and as a buffer state between Iran and Pakistan has been completely ruled out now. Indeed, the Pakistani government will be more ruthless in bringing down the Baluch movement, with the use of air power to provide cover for its troops who would be securing the Chinese interests. Most likely, on the pretext of protecting Gwadar port, gross human rights violations cannot be ruled out.

Finally, the changing profile of Pakistan wherein it becomes a dynamic and an important player determining the course of events, especially in South Asia will definitely affect the present status quo between India and Pakistan. On the rising geostrategic profile of Islamabad, Bhadrakumar (2015) emphasizes,

"Without doubt, Pakistan (along with Central Asia and Iran) becomes a gateway for China to the world market and it is crucial for Beijing that Washington's ability to block this gateway is "zero." Pakistan is actually the single most critical gateway for China in the emergent paradigm."

Undoubtedly, it will add on more diplomatic and economic responsibilities on the part of Pakistan, and it would have to perform by leaving aside its policy of encouraging and providing a safe haven for the extremists and terrorists. On the other hand, if seen from an India's viewpoint, the above developments can be correlated with first, a joint Sino-Pak attempt to limit the opportunities for India to play a major role in Central Asia, thereby cutting down on India's Connect Central Asia Policy which was introduced in 2012. Second, attempts are underway by the Russo-Sino partnership to alter the balance of power in South Asia by playing the Pakistan factor. By courting Pakistan at a much larger level, access to Iran and other countries of critical importance such as Syria, Iraq, etc., is guaranteed. Thus, significant changes are underway.

The most recent decision of the SCO to upgrade both Pakistan and India from observer status to full membership will of course have its own repercussions amongst the U.S. and its allies. Through this step, both China and Russia will increase their strategic leverage on security issues throughout the Indian subcontinent. Also, the news that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are negotiating for nuclear weapons has already taken the U.S. by surprise. If this culminates into reality, though chances are dim, then the very credibility of the U.S. amongst its allies in East Asia and in parts of Europe will definitely suffer. The entire balance will then shift in favour of China and Russia.

#### 4. INDIA'S CONCERNS

"Delhi's sustained economic growth has permitted an increase in military expenditures at

a time when its aspirations have surpassed regional dominance and are now fixed on the status of a global power, to include United Nations Security Council permanent membership” (Dalton and Tandler, 2012: 16). Thus, with India eager to expand and play an important role in the regional as well as in the world affairs, definitely the changes that have been mentioned above would not be in its interest. Rather, it would open up a plethora of challenges, which a rising power would find it difficult to resolve.

The developments examined above have changed the security architecture of Asia. Undoubtedly, China’s rise has given rise to what Barry Buzan (2012) calls as an “Asian Super Complex.” Under current Asian security scenario there seems to emerge two axis of powers in Asia under the leadership of America and China. On the one side, the axis that is emerging, include countries like U.S., South Korea, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, etc., and on the other side there is China, Pakistan, and Russia.

Currently, India is finding itself comfortable to play with both the strategies of balancing and bandwagoning to pursue its national interests. New Delhi has resorted to the mechanism of balance of power in regional systems. With the aim of achieving regional security, India has applied the concept of a soft balancing as far as triangular dynamics between the U.S., China, and India is concerned. As far as global dimension is concerned, India, despite its attempts to balance the United States power (i.e., by taking sides with Russia and China in their slogan for multilateralism), has also adopted the strategy of ‘bandwagoning’ by joining the stronger party (i.e., the Washington) with the aim of avoiding confrontation and securing its strategic interests (Zajackowski, 2014).

With Asia’s security architecture undergoing tremendous tectonic shifts, India in the longer run would be definitely “sucked in” the power games of Russia, China and the U.S., which it has been trying to avoid since its independence. Also, India would require an “external balancer” against the newly forged Sino-Russo- Pak strategic partnership. This is so because India would not be in a strategic position to handle the three countries on one side with their unique geopolitical threats and opportunities. Also, in the coming years, except for major developments such as finding an international joint solution for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), it would find itself to stand with Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. on various strategic decisions.

New Delhi would then become the fulcrum of this security dilemma; any formal major politico-strategic shifts would then set the stage for the division of the Indian subcontinent into system of alliances, with the most advantageous position then being transferred to Pakistan. India in such a situation would eventually become a formal “linchpin” as it was stated out in the Asia Pivot strategy.

From a Sino-Russo perspective on India, “Russia continued to keep India in play as a useful ally in the region and as a counterweight to Chinese regional ambitions” (Kurht, 2007: 52). China despite its differences with India on the border issue, made attempts through various CBMs to engage New Delhi and other South Asian nations, while simultaneously adopted strategies to tie down India to South Asia. During this critical period, it also projected itself as a peaceful rising power and diplomatically fulfilled an important prerequisite for its domestic, military and economic transformations.

If seen from an Indian perspective, the present day geopolitical significance of the Sino-Russo relations is determined by several factors such as the discoveries of the hydrocarbons and natural oil in Central Asia; Pakistan joining the Islamic pipeline; change in the U.S. plans to exit Afghanistan from 2014 to 2016; India’s investments in Afghanistan; India’s ambitions to be the full member of the SCO; Sino-Indian maritime competition in the Indian

Ocean Region. Also, in the past, the most striking feature of Sino-Russo strategic embrace is the quantum of arms transfer from Russia to China that began in 2005 wherein Russia agreed to shell out its Tu-22M3 and Tu-95MS.

New Delhi is indeed concerned as it has been strategically associated with both Russia and China ever since its independence. It has a direct stake in how both these countries interact with other countries, especially surrounding India. It has thus become essential for it to not only limit the presence of Pakistan, but also, to convey the message to both China and Russia that its interaction with the U.S. and its allies is not aimed at downplaying any particular country, especially China. At this crucial juncture wherein India aspires to play an active role in regional affairs, while aspiring for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), India is not in a position to 'strategically annoy' either or both the countries.

On the other hand, if India uses a neo-realist approach to find a solution to the rapidly changing dynamics, a tight-rope walk for India is imminent. The present day geopolitical conditions coupled with the stakes that India has at the international level makes it necessary for the policymakers to take immediate steps for enhancing the strategic position of India vis-à-vis both Russia and China on the one hand, and, the U.S. and its allies on the other. In order to achieve the same, New Delhi during 2013-14 has taken various diplomatic and strategic decisions that include funding of Russian Arms transfer to Afghanistan; absenteeism from the UNSC voting on a non-binding resolution on the Crimea issue; application for the inclusion in the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline; reiteration through various multilateral platforms such as the UN in abiding to the international law and maintaining the sovereignty of the states.

## 5. OPTIONS FOR INDIA

In the contexts mentioned above, the foreign policy analysts speak of three options that the country has. The first involves joining China and Russia, thereby giving a thrust to former Russian PM Primakov's idea of a strategic alliance between Russia, India and China (RIC) wherein he envisaged a role for the three countries to reshape the global order. Some of the initiatives undertaken through it are RIC Trilateral Experts Meeting on Disaster Management, Trilateral Business Forum, and Trilateral Academic Scholars Dialogue. Kundu (2012) has pointed out that New Delhi's energy security could be achieved if India aligns itself with the emerging partnership of both the countries. Tanwar (2013) is of the view that a Russia-India-China axis would alter the global strategic balance and would benefit India. Professor S.D. Muni (2013), a very prominent foreign policy expert in New Delhi opined that a Sino-Russo strategic partnership opens up new geopolitical opportunities for India. He puts forward the views that as Russia and India have a convergence on various international issues, are members of BRICS and East Asia Summit (EAS), they should use such forums for improving the prospects of world peace and stability. In this line of thought, India in 2014 referred to the "legitimate" interests of the Russia in Ukraine. No doubt, New Delhi was criticised by the west, but, India is quiet uncomfortable the way in which U.S. and its western allies have used democracy and human rights to achieve its larger strategic objectives, especially in Libya. Also, in the domestic politics of India, relations with Moscow are used as an effective tool to counterweigh the arguments against New Delhi's strategic leverage towards the U.S. However, the main issue is that India is hesitant to accept a Sino

centric regional or a world order, and the perceptions that both the countries hold about each other with a special focus on Pakistan and China's string of Pearls policy.

Barry Buzan has elaborately pointed out the rise of an "Asian Supercomplex" wherein the strategic interests of India, Japan, and other allies of the U.S. such as Australia merge together because of a rise of assertive China. Rehman (2009) has argued that economic interdependence theory is not applicable to Sino-Indian relations because of a trade imbalance between the two. He further notes that there remains a persistent conflict between the interests of the two countries, and thus, containment and counter-containment policies vis-à-vis each other would continue.

The second option would involve India making deliberately cautious attempts to balance the rise of China with the support of the U.S. and its allies. "India should have adequate nuclear prowess in order to make China feel threatened enough not to take India for granted ... the country also needs to build credible defence against ballistic missiles" (Dubey, 2012: 200). Also, Brahma Chellaney (2014) puts forward the view that China's rise and its assertiveness in South and East Asia has pushed New Delhi closer to Washington's allies such as Tokyo. Both should work together to ensure a stable and peaceful world order. Montgomery (2013) is of the view that an enhanced strategic proximity between the U.S. and its allies has the potential to create a more stable balance of power across, and for India, building a robust, blue water fleet would defiantly require the much needed American help. However, C. Rajamohan (2013) cautions that India should use its proximity with the U.S. to build up its capabilities without provoking China and losing out its own strategic autonomy.

In this direction, steps have already been initiated by the government such as a nuclear deal and a ten year defense pact with the U.S., voting against Iran in the UNSC, abandoning the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, forging a strategic partnership with Japan and training of the Afghanistan's forces at the behest of the U.S. However, India has various issues with the U.S., too, that involves Pakistan's status as a major non-NATO ally and various arms transfer to it and the arrest of an Indian diplomat.

Interestingly, one of the most prominent features of the May 9, Victory celebrations in Russia was the active participation of the Chinese military honour guards in the procession. This participation was in the background of the absence of the western leaders to mark the day. Although the western leaders had jointly boycotted the celebrations largely due to the Ukrainian issue, the leaders of the two countries emphasized primarily on the historical and the contemporary ties between the two. The Indian president, Pranab Mukerjee and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel too attended the ceremonies, despite the American and the British snub. Their presence had a strategic importance, wherein it clearly indicated a rise of the influential powers in South Asia and Europe respectively.

As India cannot afford to have a hostile China in its neighbourhood, neither continue its differences with the U.S., it must balance in such a way that it takes the much required advantage from both on key issues. Also, New Delhi should try to have a non-reciprocal durable relationship with its immediate neighbours. All these measures should be attempted at apart from increasing its economic and military might.

The third option available to India would be to maintain an equidistant relationship with both China and Russia on the one hand, and the U.S. and its allies on the other as mentioned in the India's foreign policy directive Nonalignment 2.0. Given the constraints of possession of the nuclear weapons, which are far more destructive than the weapons of the past, there might emerge chances of a geopolitical condominium between the U.S. and China. Also, the solution might include Russia, and Pakistan too because of the quantum of the strategic

leverage achieved by them. Thus, taking strategic stance between the two emerging axis at this juncture might prove detrimental to the Indian interests at a later stage.

In this direction, India too had articulated its Connect Central Asia policy in 2012 and refocused its efforts on its Look East policy and made an attempt to carve out its own place at the international platform. However, this option is rapidly being closed as India has failed to take concrete steps in order to revamp its foreign policy in changing times. Given the current scenario, Manoj Joshi (2013) opines that Russian supply of SU-35 will begin to tilt the balance in favour of China, unless India pays for the expensive up-gradation of the SU-30MKI or begin receiving the Russian fifth generation fighters in significant numbers. It has to be recalled that Indian Air Force took pride in the possession of the South Asia's most powerful radar i.e. N-011 Bars PESA (Passive Electronically Scanned Array) on the Su-30 MKI. Now, that strategic leverage would be turned further in favour of China.

C. Rekha (2014) is of the view that Russia's decision to lift its arms embargo to Pakistan is a major setback to India and can be of a tactical defeat to India. Unfortunately, this option is now being exhausted very rapidly, as New Delhi is getting quite perplexed at the expanding joint influence of both China and Russia in Asia, and beyond. This has been evident in the foreign policy decisions that India have taken during the last decade.

As India has been seen making concrete steps towards the three directions, one can state while citing examples, that one of the major issue with Indian foreign policy is that it is not too articulate as it should have been in the post 9/11 world order. Thus, by the time New Delhi adapts to the changing strategic environment, the next level of developments is likely to take place, which leaves New Delhi at the cross roads of principles and reality. This in turn creates new unforeseen complexities for New Delhi., which it finds very difficult to cope with.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Currently, the world is witnessing a transition phase of a 'Thucydides Trap' in Sino-U.S. Relations. An Asian super complex has taken shape wherein the security interests of East and South Asian nations have merged. Today, the discipline of international relations "is marked by the emergence of new issues such as the regional stability, geopolitics of various regions, energy security, maritime security etc" (Kaushiki, 2013b: 12). In this background and given the above discussion, undoubtedly, the synergy that Sino-Russo ties have displayed in international politics was completely unforeseen. The last five years of international politics have witnessed "the Grand Chessboard" being shifted to South and West Asia from Central Asia.

The rise of China in the post Cold War period has been a major determining factor in the changing status quo in South Asia. With the Sino-Russo strategic synergy at play, the dimensions of South Asian security have changed which has far reaching implications for Indian interests. In the past, India was fervently propagating Non Aligned Movement (NAM) by keeping an equidistant relationship from both the U.S. and erstwhile Soviet Union, though it was compelled because of China and Pakistan to maintain strategic relations with the Soviet Union.

The three major aspects discussed above have given rise to several questions as far as India's position in the evolving Asian structure is concerned. Firstly, how far Russia and Pakistan can go together? Second, how far China factor is going to boost the emerging

Russo-Pak synergy? Third, how far Russia-China-Pakistan axis can push India further into Western ambit? Fourth, can India and Russia overcome the emerging divergence of interests? Next, can the U.S. be the perfect alternative of Russia for India? And finally, how far India can trust U.S. to make positive overturns towards the former? The answers to these questions are not as simple as it seems to be but would largely depend on the future developments. Today, as India stands at the cusp of the changed security architecture, its past policies and practices no longer seem to serve its vital strategic interests.

As the settings of the chessboard undergoes change, India would not be able to sit on the fence any longer and take decisions that probably satisfies the strategic ego of all, and angers none. It has to manage not only China, but an active Sino-Russo strategic alliance; a U.S. which is in a relative decline though having aspirations to contain both China and Russia. Further, it also has to carefully plan its strategies in the wake of a Russo-Pak rapprochement and its neighbours who seem to have been drifted away from it under the influence of China.

New Delhi out of the changed geopolitical environment and the security architecture would be compelled recalibrate its foreign policy. It will be 'pushed' to move strategically closer to the U.S. and its allies. This, in turn might increase the animosities between the already existing partners in conflict. However, this can be stopped only if China and Russia accommodate the U.S., and vice versa. Though this seems to be not the case in the next five years or so, as this would take a toll on their respective strategic egos, India is in the process of changing the contours of its foreign policy owing to its security dilemma.

The most recent Pathankot air base attack by the terrorists who have their camps in Pakistan will further escalate the tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi. The manner in which the terrorists carried out the attacks depicted their professional military training. Despite this, China has urged India to continue the talks with Pakistan. In such a scenario, the dual policies of China in dealing with Pakistan could be once again exposed. Thus, in such a case, India has to prepare itself to take up its own cause at an international level through coercive diplomacy, apart from other measures.

Finally, as each nation seeks interest maximisation, ambiguity persists even about the next few years on what kind of a balance of power would prevail. Each development unfolds with itself new repercussions which are completely unforeseen. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong rightly puts forward that "no one can say what will happen in the next 20 years. Quite possibly the status quo will prevail, with repeated brinkmanship and occasional tensions, but hopefully no war. But worse outcomes are easily imaginable" (as cited in Valencia, 2014). Thus it is just a wait and watch, before one can finally comment as to which power would decide the future norms as well as the structure of international politics.

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