

Specter of Russia-China-Pakistan Axis Haunts Indian Minds

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A spectre is haunting Indian minds — the spectre of a Russia-China-Pakistan ‘Axis’ directed against India’s security and vital interests. At least judging by local media comments and academic discourse one gets this impression.

Of course, who doesn’t know about the ‘all-weather’ China-Pakistan relationship, but on this backdrop India’s old and time-tested friend Russia warming up to Pakistan has stolen the good night’s sleep of many strategists and analysts and caused a storm in the web based social media.

The Russia-China-Pakistan axis bogey is generally raised in the Indian media by a powerful pro-American lobby, which is prodding the (Narendra) Modi government to jump on the US bandwagon in containing China and stop buying arms from Russia. But do they understand the costs of such policy for the common Indian?

We get media reports daily about ‘cash-strapped’ Russia selling this or that lethal weapon to Pakistan, but so far only the report of selling 4-5 Mi-35M assault helicopters for anti-terror operations has been officially confirmed.

During their recent Russia visits Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif and Army Chief General Raheel Sharif evinced their interest in acquiring cutting-edge Russian weapons. There have been reports of Pakistan taking interest in buying Sukhoi Su-35 multirole state-of-the-art fighters, which has raised the BP of many strategic pundits in New Delhi.

In this context I recall former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov’s book “Years in Big Politics” (original Russian title: Gody v Bolshoi Politike) published in 1999. Since the Soviet collapse Academician Primakov was chief of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) till his appointment as Foreign Minister in January 1996 by President Boris Yeltsin.

He writes that in early 1990s Pakistan had requested for Sukhoi Su-27 fighters from Russia, which were the best warplane at that time. According to Primakov, the Russian Foreign Ministry (then headed by Andrei Kozhev) had cleared the deal. However, the Kremlin referred it to SVR.

“We asked the Pakistani side, do they have funds to buy the planes? They replied, yes, they have agreement with Saudi Arabia. We cross-checked through our channels and found it was not true. SVR established that it was a grand foreign plot to scuttle Russia’s military-technical cooperation with India,” former Russian Prime Minister Primakov wrote in his book.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov’s recent statement on the sidelines of Arms Expo in Nizhny Tagil has caused alarm in India, forcing the Russian Embassy in New Delhi to issue a clear-cut statement reiterating that Moscow will never take any step ‘detrimental’ to the security and safety of its privileged strategic partner India. It described the furore in Indian media over the agency report as ‘over reaction’.

So, what is the reality? My over three decades of experience of covering Russia has taught me never to depend on translation of the original Russian text, as the Russian language is so rich that one and the

same word may have many meanings, depending on the context. So, I naturally went to the original agency copy in English, which caused euphoria in the Pakistani web community and despair in India.

Mr. Ryabkov called Pakistan as Russia's 'nearest neighbour' (geographically) and a partner looking for developing relations in not only in defence, but also in many spheres including energy. But the English translation of the same news story described Pakistan as Russia's 'closest partner' in South Asia, which de facto questions the privileged strategic partnership with India.

However, factually it is just not true, but explains the 'over reaction' of the Indian media. Perhaps, that's why the Russian Embassy in New Delhi was forced to issue an unprecedented denial, reiterating Moscow's commitment to the Strategic Partnership Declaration of 2000, where both Russia and India have taken obligations not to indulge into activities 'detrimental' to the security of other party.

The Russia-Pakistan bogey was first raised after Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's November 2014 Islamabad visit, when the two countries signed a defence cooperation agreement. To be frank, such agreements are a common thing in the diplomatic practice of the nations formally not at war. So what? India also holds joint war games with the Chinese military. Not only this, for over a decade we have interacted with China at the highest level in the Russia-India-China triangle, is it an anti-Pakistan triangle?

Moreover both New Delhi and Islamabad are in the process of joining the Russia-China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with the prime goal of combating terrorism, extremism and separatism – the problems of main concern for India. Pakistan will now have to prove its commitment to the common goal to other fellow members of this regional organisation.

In view of the imminent US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia sees Pakistan as a key player in its neighbourhood, which can play either a stabilising or destabilising role, in both cases a mechanism of interaction is a must. According to a former top general of Soviet General Staff, during their Afghan campaign the Soviets maintained constant contact with the Pakistani ISI.

During their Afghan consultations, India and Russia have repeatedly agreed that Pakistan has a role in post-war dispensation in Afghanistan. Russian fears about extremist spill-over into the secular post-Soviet regimes of Central Asia, home to millions of ethnic Russians.

If that is so, why should Moscow not adopt a pro-active stance in involving Islamabad in its own calculus? Even China is wary of ISIL spilling over to its Muslim-dominated Eastern Turkistan and is also adopting the complex economic strategy to engage Pakistan.

What concerns Russia's alliance with China, the developments here are logical continuation of their interaction over past decades and not the result of US-led Western sanctions over Ukraine. Gas and pipelines going to China are not new projects. What concerns Central Asia, objectively Russia and China are both rivals and partners and by joining SCO India also can play its positive role in the development of the region by partnering with Moscow, which unlike Chinese 'One Road One Belt' (OROB) project, wants to revive not only Silk Road, but all the ancient trade routes crisscrossing huge Eurasian land mass of former Soviet Union in all directions.

As a responsible regional power with the ambitions of becoming global power, India should use the opportunities opening with Russia's economic activities in our neighbourhood.

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