

Emerging Trends in Russia's South Asia Policy: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

The end of the cold war and the disintegration of the USSR transformed the entire fabric of post-second world war security arrangements in Asia. In this backdrop, South Asia emerged as one of the most challenging regions for Russia from the point of view traditional security. Since Russia has traditionally maintained good relations with the other states of South Asia and they do not pose any direct challenge to Russia's vital national interests, the analysis in this article has been restricted to the dominant players in South Asia - India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The influence, role and interests of outside powers, especially China and the United States, have also been taken into account when dealing with Russia's South Asia policy.

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Introduction

Russian foreign and security policy is based on the concept of a 'multipolar' world which was formulated by former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov. According to this viewpoint, there are at least six major global actors - the USA, Russia, EU, China, India and Japan. (Malek: 384; also see Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation) From Russian foreign policy point of view, USA received top most attention and India was way behind.

Unlike the Soviet Union, which needed a special relationship with India in its political and strategic

rivalry with the West and China, Russia - in the post-cold war years - did not seem to need India as a strategic ally. With the emergence of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as independent states, the Russian and Indian borders moved apart. India therefore did not impinge on the immediate concerns of the new Russia. (Vinay) In fact, one could notice two schools of thought emerging in Russia in respect of its policy towards India. (Vinay) One school - largely the academic community - favoured traditional special relationship with India. (Shaumian: 55) According to this school, India should be given priority in Russia's policy towards South Asia, while at the same time good relations were needed to be developed with other South Asian countries, including Pakistan. Another school - that was associated with foreign ministry headed by Kozyrev - favoured ending the special relationship with India. It advocated that looking at developments in South Asia through Indian spectacles affected Russia's relations with other regional actors, especially Pakistan. During the early years of President Yelstin, the advocates of the second approach got prominence over the first one. However, with in a short while this scenario changed.

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On a visit to New Delhi at the end of 1998, Primakov put forward the idea of a strategic 'triangle' consisting of Russia, China and India, a counterforce against the burgeoning US influence in Asia. Again in December 2002, Vladimir Putin called for greater cooperation and coordination among the three powers. All the three countries were threatened by the forces of separatism and terrorism. Russia was faced with the problems of Chechnya; the unity of China was threatened in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan; and India was under threat in Kashmir. This apart, China and India purchase around 70 percent of total Russian arms exports (Malek: 385) which forms the basis of the three countries coming closer. Moreover, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)¹ provides the right kind of platform to all the three countries to come closer. Further, what is noteworthy is that while dealing with both India and China, Russia has been very careful. Russia keeps itself away from the Sino-Indian border dispute. On the one hand Russia cooperates with China on a much larger scale and on the other hand supplies India with more sophisticated weapons than they sell to China. Russia also refrained from imposing sanctions against India in 1998 when New Delhi developed and tested its own nuclear weapons. (Trenin: 18)

India: Moscow's Preferred Partner in South Asia

As already mentioned, in the early post-Soviet period, relations with India were not on the priority list of Russia. In the 'three circles' foreign policy doctrine of Russia's first Foreign Minister, Andrey Kozyrev, India was placed in the third circle with the rest of the world, while relations with the West were placed in the first circle. In the second circle were the countries of the 'near abroad' - the former Soviet republics. (Shukla)

In South Asia, India has been the main partner of Russia since the mid-20th century. In 1998, the then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov came up with the idea of closer interactions between Asia's three important powers - Russia, India and China. In early 2000s, Moscow took keen interests and formed a forum for the emerging economies, BRIC (now BRICS) into a club of major non-Western countries. (Trenin: 17)

The 1971 Indo-Soviet friendship treaty was renewed in 1991, shortly before the demise of the USSR. India and Russia signed a new friendship treaty in the year 1993. 'Foreign Policy Concept of the

Russian Federation' (2000) (Malek: 386) postulated a 'deepening of the traditional partnership with India' designed to promote stability in South Asia. According to a survey by the opinion research institute *Obshchestvennoe Mnenie* in 2001, India topped the list of countries² that were assessed as friendly towards Russia. (Malek: 386) In December 2002, Vladimir Putin during his visit to India supported India's candidature for becoming become a permanent member of the UN Security Council and New Delhi's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation² (SCO). (Malek: 386)

Energy cooperation between India and Russia has been growing at a moderate pace. In February 2001, India's state-owned oil and gas company ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) and the Russian owned Rosneft Company signed an agreement providing for Indian investment in the Sakhalin oil and gas fields in Russia's Far East. (Sangani and Schaffer) OVL has acquired a 20 percent stake from Rosneft in the Sakhalin-I offshore project. This apart, Civil Nuclear Cooperation adds another important dimension in India-Russia bilateral relations.

By and large, Russia's bilateral political relations with India has been friendly but it has a very meagre impact on economy considering the fact that volume of trade between the two sides have been very low (around US\$ 10 billion) This has been a major challenge before the present government in Delhi led by Sri Narendra Modi. Russia has made steps to involve the Indians in its energy projects in Siberia, but this is not enough. Even in areas where Russia has long dominated, such as arms sales to India, it is now meeting with serious competition from Europe and America. In order to bring the relationship to a new height Russia, according to Dmitri Trenin, needs to make a major effort to involve the Indians in co-development and co-production of weapon systems. (Trenin: 18)

Military-Industrial Cooperation: It is important to note that India is the only country with which Russia has been conducting a long-term programme of military-industrial cooperation. On January 20, 2004, the two countries signed a \$1.6 billion deal towards India's purchase of the refurbished Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Gorshkov*, fighter jets and helicopters. (Malek: 387) Noteworthy to add that the Indian navy and air force are largely equipped with Soviet/Russian weapons. Apart from purchase of Russian armaments, India has been manufacturing Russian weapons under license and there has been a number of joint developments projects underway that includes the supersonic

anti-ship missile *BrahMos*. (Malek: 387) In fact, India is the only country with which Russia has been conducting a long term programme of military industrial cooperation. (Sangani and Schaffer) This apart, Russia and India has been conducting joint naval exercises at regular intervals.

Kashmir Conflict

Russia's position on the Kashmir conflict has not changed since the Soviet period. Russia regards Kashmir as integral part of India and therefore within and outside the United Nations Moscow does not advocate holding a referendum³ in Kashmir. (Malek: 388) Russian Foreign Ministry and a number of Russian South Asia experts advocate declaring the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LoC) running through Kashmir to be an international border and thus formalising the status quo that has prevailed for a long time. (Malek: 386) Russia has advocated settling the Kashmir conflict on the basis of the Simla Accord (1972) and Lahore agreement, signed between India and Pakistan. Pakistan, in contrast, viewed the Line of Control as the root cause of Kashmir issue and thus does not share Russian view point. (Malek: 389) Russia also expressed concern about the surge in terrorist activities in the Kashmir valley and accused Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of spying Islamic terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir with weapon and other logistical support. Vladimir Putin, during his visit to India in December 2002, called upon Pakistan to destroy the 'terrorist infrastructure' serving separatist operations in Kashmir. Russia also does not believe that only the Kashmir factor prevents the normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan.

In a series of bilateral meetings, Moscow and New Delhi agreed to assist each other in the fight against terrorism. In early December 2002, the two governments signed a joint memorandum for the establishment of a 'joint Russia-India working group on combating international terrorism. (Malek: 389) This development resulted in more intensive exchange on sharing intelligence information, closer cooperation between the security forces of both Russia and India. At the Delhi Declaration in December 2002, Russia and India agreed for further consolidation of strategic partnership between the two countries. It was further declared that they were both 'victims of terrorism'. (Delhi Declaration) (Malek: 389) In this context, it is important to add that Russian Muslims are being trained at Pakistani Madrasas and upon their return to Russia, they spread fundamentalism.

Islamic Universities in Pakistan funded by Saudi Arabia has been actively engaged in imparting education to students from the Central Asian states.

Policy towards Pakistan

Russia believes that Pakistan and its intelligence services contributed significantly towards the emergence and success of the Taliban. One of Russian's accusations against the Taliban was that they set up training camps for terrorists, including those from Chechnya in the territory they controlled in Afghanistan. The Russian Foreign Ministry accused Pakistan of welcoming few Chechen leaders on their soil. Extremists' elements in Pakistan had equated Chechen crisis with that of Kashmir. However, the official view of Pakistan is that Chechnya was an integral part of Russia and that it could not be compared to Kashmir on the ground that the United Nations had recognised Kashmir as legally disputed territory. At the same time, Pakistan had criticised Russian army excess in Chechnya. (Malek: 393) This apart, top level official bilateral contracts between Russia and Pakistan in the post-Soviet period have been very few. In 1993, Andrei Kozyrev became the first Russian Foreign Minister to visit Pakistan. In March 1993, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff visited Russia. Thereafter, Putin's invitation to Musharaf however did not lead to a breakthrough in Russia-Pakistan bilateral relations. (Malek: 395-96)

During the cold war period, Pakistan used to be a major security problem for Russia. Gradually in the post-cold war years, Pakistan started winning some space in Russia's South Asia policy. Moscow recognised Islamabad's importance for future stability in Afghanistan and started selling weapons to Pakistan, though the volume had been minimal. (Trenin: 18)

Policy towards Afghanistan

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, Russia had evinced very little interests on Afghanistan at least in the immediate post-cold war years. Once Afghanistan had been liberated from Taliban regime, Russia made its intension clear about its involvement in Afghanistan. (Malek: 396-97) In early December 2002, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov accused Pakistan of destabilizing situation in Afghanistan. (Malek: 397)

From Russia's perspective, war-torn Afghanistan is a major source of regional insecurity. Since the

toppling of the Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001, to which Russia contributed through its links with the Northern Alliance, Moscow has been keeping a low profile in the country where it lost 13,000 servicemen during the Soviet Union's Afghan war of 1979-1989. After 9/11, however, Russia assisted the US/NATO troops to stabilise situation in Afghanistan. Since the departure of a major section of NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2014, Moscow has been keeping its lines of communication open to the government in Kabul and various ethno-regional groupings. (Trenin: 19)

Nuclear Politics in South Asia: Russia's Dilemma

Following India's nuclear test and Pakistan's response in 1998, put Moscow in a tight spot. Different views emanated from Russia. Officially commentators in Moscow emphasised that the test conducted by India and Pakistan placed Russia in a difficult situation. Russia unequivocally criticised the nuclear tests along with the West. At the same time, Moscow did not want to disturb its traditional friendship with India. (Shukla: 258)

India's nuclear tests therefore put Russian policy makers in a dilemma. In its official response Moscow was unequivocally critical towards New Delhi. President Boris Yeltsin complained that 'India has let us down'. (India has let us down) The official statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on May 12, 1998 expressed deep concern and regret over the Indian action and urged India to reverse its nuclear policy and sign the NPT and CTBT. (Malek: 394-95) It was apprehended that India's nuclear policy could lead to a chain reaction in South Asia and beyond. (Shukla: 260) Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov remarked that India's decision to carry out the nuclear tests was 'short-sighted' and 'unacceptable' to Russia. He further stated that 'We especially would not want Pakistan to follow in India's footsteps'. Russia firmly stands with the P5 countries in their desire to keep the nuclear club small and exclusive, and not allow any new entrants and therefore would not recognise India and Pakistan as nuclear weapon states. It may be further added that - according to the NPT guidelines - only those states which had nuclear weapons or had exploded a nuclear device before January 1, 1967 could be regarded as nuclear weapon states. (Shukla: 260) Therefore, Russia did not regard India and Pakistan as official nuclear powers, despite the fact that both the countries had successfully conducted nuclear tests in 1998.

During Russian Prime Minister Primakov's talks with the Indian counterpart Vajpayee in New Delhi in December 1998, Moscow made its position clear that India should sign the NPT and accede to the CTBT. Vajpayee however pointed out that after India's nuclear tests the suggestion that New Delhi accept the NPT had become superfluous. Regarding CTBT, India had already declared a unilateral moratorium and was engaged in negotiations with the USA on the test ban issue. (Shukla: 262) Interesting enough to add that the leaders of opposition parties in Russia however took a pro-India stand. Gennady Zyuganov, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, welcomed India's nuclear tests. (Shukla: 261) Another prominent Communist leader - Gennady Seleznev, Speaker of the lower house of the parliament - applauded India's determination to carry on with its nuclear weapon programme, despite pressure from several corners. (Shukla: 261) A headline in *Izvestiya* (May 14, 1998) published a news: 'Moscow will not quarrel with its ally: Indian nuclear tests do not threaten Russia'. (Yurkin)

On the nuclear strategic issue, Russia stands firmly with the West. On November 14, 1998, along with the USA, UK and France, Russia voted against a UN General Assembly resolution tabled by India calling for a review of the nuclear doctrines of the nuclear weapon states and a ban on the use and threats of the use of nuclear weapons in order to move towards global disarmament. (Shukla: 259)

At the same time, Russia made it very clear from the outset that it opposed sanctions imposed on India by the West on the grounds that they would only prove counter-productive. Moscow would rather rely on diplomacy to try to bring about a change in India's nuclear policy. (Shukla: 260) Thus, it became evident that nuclear tests conducted by New Delhi would not come in the way of Indo-Russian cooperation. It was also officially announced that Russia's cooperation with India in the civil nuclear sector would continue.

During the Soviet era, Moscow tried to reconcile apparently contradictory aspects of its policy by making a general appeal in favour of universal adherence to the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty but refrained from overtly criticising India for not signing it. (Shukla: 259) The Soviet leaders took note of India's compulsions and also refrained from criticising India for its peaceful nuclear test in 1974. This apart, the Soviet Union expressed

serious concern at the reports of the secret Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme. (Shukla: 259) Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi signed the famous Delhi Declaration on a *Non-Violent and Nuclear-Free World*, which could be seen as clear support for the Indian stand of seeking global, non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament within a given time-frame. (Shukla: 259)

Conclusion

Russia does not have a comprehensive overarching policy towards South Asia, rather it is largely issue driven. South Asia is however strategically important to Moscow because of the region's proximity to the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and also India-Pakistan hostility that threatens peace and stability in the region. Russia's main strategic worry is the threat of Islamic extremism spilling over into Central Asia and affecting Islamic population in Russia. In this respect, Russia perceives Pakistan as a major threat and therefore wants to prevent Pakistani based Islamic groups from undermining Russia's efforts to deal with terrorism in its territory and outside in Central Asia. Thus, Russia's South Asia policy has by far remained squarely focussed on geopolitics, with economic issues still playing a supporting role. Post-Soviet years trend indicates that in the foreseeable future Russia's South Asia policy will essentially remain India-centric because it assures Moscow's geopolitical interests in one of the most challenging and promising regions. To put it more bluntly, Russia-India strategic partnership has been instrumental in maintaining regional peace and stability and an effective mechanism in ensuring Moscow's vital strategic and security interests.

Notes

1. SCO is a regional grouping of a number of countries - China, Russia, Central Asian states, India and Pakistan. SCO annual summits provide Russia with an opportunity for regular meetings with leaders of the rest of

members. Since 1999-2000, the SCO activities have focussed on fighting terrorism, and promoting economic coordination among the member states.

2. A total of 83 percent polled regard India as a friendly country and only 4 percent viewed it as unfriendly. With regard to China, around 66 percent expressed their views in favour.
3. Pakistan does call for a referendum in Kashmir citing UN resolutions of August 1948 and January 1949 that focus on the right of self-determination.

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