



## SYNCHRONIZATION OF INTERESTS: EMERGING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN CHINA, RUSSIA AND PAKISTAN IN A BRAVE NEW WORLD

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### RESEARCH BRIEF



**"Orient is a delicate matter"**

- White Sun of the Desert

## Introduction

Since the dawn of 21st century drastic changes occurred within the global environment of power politics and relationships. Nations fractured, insurgencies grew, societies faltered and faiths challenged, these changes have affected every nation on earth. However, the year 2010 marked the beginning of the new age. An age of shifting interests and realignment of power relationships. This matrix of new age gave birth to the strategic partnership of three key power players around whom which now lies the resolution of many significant regional issues and whose collective political decisions can shape the geopolitical environment for years to come. This prospective triangular power relationship is between China, Russia and Pakistan. With China's bankrolling and global sway, Russia with its muscular strength and information warfare and Pakistan with its hard-earned experience on terrorism and geostrategic location – this emerging strategic partnership in the offing have inherent political potential to pull the strings and call the shots in emerging regional and global political theater.

Erosion of American global leadership, under President Obama, in post-2010 world, has made host of power players to rethink and reorganize international political order which is progressively shifting from unipolar to multipolar order. Ian Bremer, president of the Eurasian Group, introduced the term 'G-zero' to define this reconstitution of world order. In his foreign affairs article, he asserted: 'We are now living in a G-Zero world, one in which no single country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage--or the will--to drive a truly international agenda. The result will be intensified conflict on the international stage over vitally important issues, such as international macroeconomic coordination, financial regulatory reform, trade policy, and climate change. This new order has far-reaching implications for the global economy, as companies around the world sit on enormous stockpiles of cash, waiting for the current era of political and economic uncertainty to pass. Many of them can expect an extended wait'.

Multipolarity on the global stage has its natural sway on the Asian political order. A region of multi faith, multiethnic and multi culture composition, Asia is uniquely situated to excavate tremendous benefits from this international shift from westward to eastward. Although greater importance has been attached to Asia-Pacific region, the East and Southeast Asia are equivocally significant because both regions – Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific – are geopolitically inextricable.

China's colossal strategic investment in One Belt, One Road economic initiative, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and its prospective connectivity with OBOR and Pakistan's geostrategic location are among the key factors that will define the emerging triangular power relation between the three. In this research brief we look independently each of the three power players and seeks to answer the three fundamental questions: where does their interests converge with each other and in what nature? What are the motivating factors behind the convergence of interests? And what impact does this trio will exert on Asian Order?

## The Enterprise: Chinese Soft Power towards Asian Commerce

Peoples Republic of China, under Xi Jinping's Leadership, embarked on an amphibiously envisioned and ambitiously pursued economic strategy to integrate Asia with Europe, Middle East, and Africa with One Belt One Road initiative. Chinese One Belt and One Road initiative comprises of two major development projects. A New Silk Road Economic Belt which will establish on land trade routes between China and Europe through central and western Asian states and Maritime Silk Road which will connect China with Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe – a reversed Marco Polo. China aims with his grandiose economic initiative to embed itself profoundly in the global economic interaction through multitudinous trade and investment, infrastructural development and trans-regional connectivity enterprises.

President Xi in his speech at UN General Assembly 70th Anniversary stated: 'China will continue to pursue common development and the win-win strategy of opening up. We are ready to share our development experience and opportunities with other countries and welcome them to board China's express train of development so that all of us will achieve common development.' This emphasis on collective development is an important tenet of Chinese global

economic strategy in the 21st century, an emphasis President Xi reiterated in his World Economic Forum, Davos'2017 address: 'Global economy is the big ocean that you cannot escape from. Any attempt to cut off the flow of capital, technologies, products, industries and people between economies, and channel the waters in the ocean back into isolated lakes and creeks is simply not possible. Indeed, it runs counter to the historical trend. The history of mankind tells us that problems are not to be feared. What should concern us is refusing to face up to problems and not knowing what to do about them. In the face of both opportunities and challenges of economic globalization, the right thing to do is to seize every opportunity, jointly meet challenges and chart the right course for economic globalization.'

However nowhere in the world Chinese Dream of global commerce integration is as significant as it is in the Asian Order. Asia is an integral part, and key to success, to realize this OBOR enterprise. Pakistan and Russia are two important pillars in Chinese geostrategic ambition, former in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and latter in OBOR integration with Eurasian Economic Union. Matters of commerce, collective defense and regional security are essential shared objectives of the strategic partners in China Pakistan and Russia.

In Pakistan's perspective, Chinese sought to accelerate their trade and commerce profile through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an essential component in Maritime Silk Road enterprise, comprising of networks of railways, highways and pipelines alongside construction of numerous energy and industrial projects and other critical infrastructural projects which seeks to stave off Pakistan's energy starvation, promote regional connectivity and pave way for China's access to the Indian Ocean by connecting China's Xinjiang province with Pakistan's Gwadar Port. A maritime pathway that will arrest the anxiety in Chinese deep state regarding the Malacca Dilemma – 80% of China energy along with trade moves through this politically turbulent waterway. CPEC, inherently, as much as it is economic in nature it also has a security nature as Daniel S. Markey, a senior fellow, and James West, a research associate at CRF, noted: 'CPEC represents an international extension of China's effort to deliver security through economic development. Investments in Pakistan are intended to create jobs, reduce anti state sentiment, and generate public resources for additional improvements in law and order. By tackling the threat of jihadi organizations in neighboring Pakistan, China hopes to better secure its own territory.'

Talha Ibraheem, research associate at center of strategic and contemporary research (CSCR) and accredited from USIP, asserted: 'Due to its linkage with CPEC and its geographical positioning in the Arabian Sea, the Gwadar Port shall act as a linchpin of OBOR scheme. It cannot be disregarded that that Gwadar Port will be modelled as a joint Sino-Pak naval offensive base in future, having round-the-clock Chinese military presence. Apart from easing the counter-piracy operations in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gwadar Port can aid in offsetting the naval advantage of littoral states who can choke of China trade and energy logistics in case of hostility. The probability of Maritime Silk Route remaining operational, even in case of any contingencies, thus increases manifold.'

China's strategic pivot to Indian Ocean through Gwadar Port to secure maritime routes mirrors the pivot of all great powers to the seas to secure the oceans for protecting their interests and projecting their power.

Convergence of Pakistan and China geostrategic interests transcend beyond the geography and also exercise an important role in Afghanistan. In Afghan theater, Chinese interests represents multi-engagement. With development assistance, investment enterprises and emerging security role to procure and preserve its strategic objectives in the country. China sought to explore its economic prospect in Afghanistan extraordinary untapped mineral wealth. But before realization of any economic opportunity, the increasingly volatile security environment demands resolution. China despite of its emerging proactive role in augmenting Afghan security apparatus with counter-terrorism and defense initiatives seems reluctant to fill into the shoes of US and, by far, chose to stay behind and operate in a strong-supporting role at least until the US strategy under President Trump clearly manifest United States future role in Afghanistan.

Andrew Small, transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund, articulated this leadership prospect of China in Afghanistan: 'China's level of engagement will remain constrained, however, by its own national interests. Although China wants to see the United States successfully stabilize Afghanistan, it is also wary of a long-term U.S. or NATO presence. Chinese analysts predict U.S. domination of the region and warn of possible encirclement, with U.S. bases remaining near China's borders for decades. China also wants to preserve its relative immunity from international terrorism, which it may become the target of if it is more active in Afghanistan. It also does not want to risk angering its

own Muslim minorities.'

Sino-Russian interests converge dramatically in emerging multipolar world including shared animosity of United States. With shared multilateral platforms and institutions of BRICS and SCO, China and Russia seeks to strengthen their strategic partnership relying on their shared interests in the regional and global politics. Russian initiative of Eurasian Economic Union and Chinese initiative of One Belt, One Road sought to revolutionize the world trade and integrate world economics together in a trans-regional connectivity and cooperation, a shared vision pertaining to G-zero world. Pepe Escobar, prominent political commentator, stated: 'Russia and China are not only protecting their core national interests but advancing their complementarity. Russian excellence in aerospace, defense technology and heavy equipment manufacturing matches Chinese excellence in agriculture, light industry and information technology. Russia and China - backed by the institutional weight of BRICS, SCO, CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are more than a match to the Atlanticist block in political, economic and military terms.'

Zhao Huasheng, professor and director of Russian and Central Asian studies at Fudan University, noted: 'The current friendly situation was hard won but there is nothing to suggest that it will last over the long term. The present state of China-Russia relations can best be described as friendly neutrality.' China and Russia share perspectives on Afghanistan, South Asia especially Pakistan's role as geostrategic pivot, Eurasian integration, arresting intractable violence and fragility in Middle East. While sharing maritime perspectives on Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific and the imperative prevention of United States 'rebalancing act in Asia' with minimal conflict and impeccable cooperation.

This emerging triangular power relation recognizes that there is no free lunch in international diplomacy as the case reflects of Venezuela and China. Nations tailor their policies on costs and benefits analysis. Chinese strategic partnerships with Pakistan and Russia exhibit prominently this inextricable cardinal principle of international diplomacy and global economics. However in these strategic partnerships gains far outweigh the losses.

It is significant to view present Chinese geostrategy in its historical context to have a better grasp on understanding the emerging Chinese role in contemporary global affairs. Leland Lazarus, an M.A candidate at Fletcher School, asserts three possible pathways for China in emerging multipolarity in historical context of Romance of Three Kingdoms, a cult classic novel by Luo Guanzhong. In his article he stated China fracturing after Han Dynasty decimation in 220 lead warlords of the time to ferociously contest the vacuum in a struggle to unite China. Three main contenders were Wu, Wei, and Shu kingdoms respectively. Each kingdom representing a singular trait that defines the kingdom's character and its policies. Wu kingdom do not share any grand strategic ambition and was mainly concerned with protecting its sovereignty and fiercely fought 'tooth and nail' to preserve its control over its territorial sovereignty. A position of China today in South China Sea where Beijing sought close ties with Moscow to keep in check expanding US ambitions in the South China littoral.

Wei kingdom personified manipulation and totalitarianism. The central enemy of the three kingdom is Cao Cao, cold-blooded pragmatist who occasionally turn alliances against each other and strike the same alliances whenever opportunity presents itself in order to achieve his objectives. Cao Cao infamously quoted to have said, "I would rather betray the whole world than to have the whole world betray me". Chinese economic edge in modern world give the Beijing an opportunity to exploit the weaker ones in total allegiance. China exploit mineral wealth from many nations and construct infrastructural enterprises in Africa and Latin America but rarely teach the local populace the skills to maintain it thus creating a vicious dependency cycle.

Finally Shu Kingdom represents humane authority. As evident from China One Belt, One Road geostrategic initiative Beijing exhibits the world its soft image of international engagement through trade connectivity and shared commerce and growth.

It is essential for all power players involve in this grand strategic chessboard to continually evaluate Chinese postures in this historical contexts to evolve their policies according to the posture and it is imperative for China as well to continually evaluate its role and posture to gauge how other nations perceive China in evolving political environment.

# Eurasian Resurgence: Russia's Pechant for Endowing Order and Exhibition of Influence in Asian Theater

Russia is one of the most strategically important countries in the world. It shares geography with Western and Eastern hemisphere and stands at the crossroad of cross-civilizational contact. Changing political landscape revitalize the Russian economic prospects in Eurasia as Russia seeks to enhance its economic umbrella and political capital into Europe and integrate economics under Eurasia Economic Union.

Eurasia Economic Union (EEU), created by Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus in 2015, seeks to transform Eurasia into a multilateral platform of exuberant regional connectivity with eased cross-border movements and trade barriers to lift up commerce of the rather impoverished shared neighborhood of European Union and Russia. While critics, and likewise supporters, present their respective cases in opposition and in support of EEU, regional politics continues to dominate its appreciation in the region.

Critics, especially Brussels, argue that EEU is more geopolitical in character and conduct rather than economic. Russia, which is spearheading EEU, seeks to establish its firm control over the post-soviet territories, leveraging economics for geopolitical clout and exert more influence in European affairs through the enterprise. But Moscow is of the view that changing dynamics of global order presents the people with the reality that emerging multipolar international order will be comprised of Macro Blocs which will transcend continents. Moscow also asserts the belief that Russian economy suffered owing to European initiatives in the region in the form of EU Association Agreements which includes Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA). Advocates argue that EEU offers brilliant economic prospect for the region in terms of easing cross-border movements and labor migration within the bloc and long term gains can be achieved from harmonization of relations between member states based on regional cooperation and interdependent trade.

But surge in European populism and ethnocentric worldview of the emerging political leaderships in some of the most important European capitals including France and Germany, EEU might be reinvigorated with reorientation of Central Asian and Non-EU European states towards Moscow to seek the refuge from Kremlin wrath in the aftermath of European nationalism.

There is, however, another grand geostrategic enterprise in the making – China's One Belt, One Road initiative – which by homogenizing with Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union - can integrate the entire Eurasian landmass as a one, resplendent holistic entity signifying trans-national cooperation and globalized free trade.

China and Russia strategic partnership evolved significantly under the leaderships of President Putin and Xi Jinping with multitude of defense, trade, energy and infrastructural development projects signed within the period of less than three years. This renewed dynamic in strategic relationship dispelled the long harbored doubts in the Kremlin regarding OBOR and view from Moscow changed dramatically after 2015 when it starts to view both initiatives – OBOR and EEU – as complementary, a view shared by Beijing.

Moscow strategic calculus in relation with OBOR is primarily comprised of three objectives in mind. First, Moscow hopes to enjoy recognition of EEU by Beijing for its larger legitimacy at world stage while concurrently establishing economic interaction between both initiatives which, Moscow hopes, to not to hamper its sway on Central Asian states. Secondly, Moscow hopes that by recognizing Beijing as emerging hegemon of the region it can ease its operating apparatus of political and security capabilities in the region. Central Asian states also supports this status quo as they do not want to be quashed by Beijing monopoly and Beijing, itself, is reluctant to be security guardian of the region. Thirdly, Moscow sees the prospect of Chinese bankrolling Russia as the crippling sanctions from the West due to its aggressive conduct in the European affairs progressively increases.

Cash-strapped Moscow desire China to support Russia by giving China access to previously off-limits state sectors which are regarded as strategic in nature. However, Beijing has its own limits and is bargaining with Moscow to suit its interests. Political capital invested in China by Russia is a very dangerous gambit and in a long-run, if status quo persist in Europe, may hurt Russian interests after all international diplomacy is a cynical game.

South Asia is another region where Russian two-fold political penetration seems to be increasingly lately with the recent overtures by Russia towards Pakistan – previous cold war adversaries – who now with rapidly evolving dynamics in Afghanistan, South Asia and in the wider region seems to be of the shared view that their interests converge more than they diverge with each other on myriad of matters.

Russia bolstering of defense, energy and the most recent security ties with the joint Military exercise ‘Friendship-2016’ with Pakistan represent a clean break from the cold war animosity and recognition in both countries with skepticism in Russian Deep State that their strategic partnership has more benefits than costs attached to it.

But the relations between Pakistan and Russia are still in their nascent state with projects undertaken reflecting a relatively frugal and cautionary approach in view with many actors involved. Pakistan’s archrival India, whom Russia has a longtime strategic partnership that goes back to cold war, is expressing its unease with the growing warmer ties between the two. Russia is the second largest defense exporter to India. The prospective bilateral trade between the India and Russia is targeted to reach US\$30 Billion by 2025.

Indian concerns regarding strategic embrace of Pakistan-Russia led Moscow to reaffirm its commitment to India while simultaneously making India realize that multi polarity requires nations to form relations with countries independent of their relation with another country. The size and magnitude of Indian-Russia relation is incomparable to the relative nascent relationship of Pakistan-Russia.

Concurrently, in an unfolding geopolitical environment, Pakistan and Russia also need to enhance their relative sparing engagement into multilateral engagement with economics and security forming the bedrock of their bilateral relation. Andrew Korybko, political analyst and specialist on Russia geopolitics and US strategy in Eurasian, recently presented a case for long overdue visit of Russia’s President Putin to South Asia. In his view, President Putin can visit South Asia on three times – infrastructure, trade and institutions. He can also play a role in bringing the gap between India and Pakistan on common economic grounds by discussing a prospect of EEU-SAARC joint engagement.

Russia and Pakistan both share a set of interests which complement each other strategic objectives. Russia seeks a resolution of protracted Afghanistan quandary which is causing a difficult operating environment for Russia. Moscow also fears the spillover of terrorism to its backyard in Central Asia from Afghanistan especially after IS emergence which threatens the stability of Russia itself, in particular reference with Chechnya. Russia also harbor fear of geopolitical repercussions due to the presence of United States forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s interests, on the other hand, are largely threefold. First it seeks to strengthen its position in the region by engaging with second nuclear power and geopolitical powerhouse in the region. Like Russia, Pakistan also seeks a peaceful resolution of Afghan crises from which it has suffered more than any other nation. Pakistan also seeks a prospect of granting Russia access to deep port in Gwadar and subsequent incorporation of Russia into OBOR – serving as a geostrategic pivot to Indian Ocean – a delicately strategic position Pakistan, in the long run, can leverage for pursuit of varying objectives.

Ahmed Rashid, a prominent political commentator and an author of five books on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, is of the view that: 'The key to warmer ties between Pakistan and Russia is an end to the continuing civil war in Afghanistan. Both China and Russia feel threatened by this war, and by the number of young men from their Muslim populations who are joining militant groups. Russia and Pakistan also now share a common threat - that of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS), which is recruiting youngsters in Russia, Central Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.'

Afghan predicament is the place where interests of this triangular power relation – Pakistan, China and Russia – are closely aligned. Recent tripartite meeting between these three powers players in Moscow in absence of an Afghan delegation send a clear signal that tripartite is ready to engage in a more proactive role in resolving the quagmire. As discussed before, strategic tripartite share a profound concern with the volatile security circumstances and recognize the need to progress urgently on the matter before the relative peace evaporates. Emergence of IS in Afghan Theater also compounded the problem and facilitating the urgency for resolution because any civil war in Afghanistan is bound

to awash the prospect of regional economic prosperity through connectivity and trade.

## **Asia's Geostrategic Fulcrum: Pakistan reinvigorated strength of commitment to the Asian Order**

Pakistan is one of the most vital countries for world powers owing to its geostrategic location ; it borders India to the east, Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest and China to the northeast with a coastline protruding vastly towards Arabian Sea. A geographically strategic location which is envy to many, Pakistan can play a pivotal role in emerging geo economics of the region.

Revitalizing itself from decade long terrorism, shattering economy, starving energy crises and other wide ranging socio-economic conflicts, Pakistan recovering from the security abyss amidst still-troubling facets of partially homegrown and partially foreign-sponsored terrorism.

Pakistan economy stimulated by China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a US\$ 46 billion economic initiative of China, biggest ever foreign direct investment of China in Pakistan, to build critical infrastructure to facilitate bilateral trade and China's pivot to Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port – a significant component in entire Beijing economic strategy. CPEC itself is a component of a larger Chinese enterprise, One Belt One Road (OBOR, the centerpiece of China's economic diplomacy since 2013. Junhua Zhang, professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, asserted: 'One Belt One Road is a product of Chinese neomercantilist thinking. Today's neomercantilism differs from the mercantilism of the 17th to early 20th century, when merchants were often complicit in the imperialism of the great powers in pursuit of increased political power and private wealth. Neomercantilism today is much more constrained, thanks to national and international legal frameworks, reluctance to engage in armed conflicts, as well as a greater widespread appreciation of human rights.'

China-Pakistan relation is one the most inspiring bilateral relations that stood the test of hard times and prevail with even stronger bonding. Intensive shared interests in multitudinous sectors gained China the honor of Pakistan's 'All Weather Friend'. In emerging order Pakistan-China seeks to enhance their bilateral relationship to an unprecedented levels with relatively shared views on domestic, regional and international politics.

Pakistan-Russia ties are also strengthening in recent years. As discussed above, Pakistan and Russia while maintaining caution and patience seeks to increase their bilateral relation in multiples of areas of mutual interests. In South Asian context, Pakistan's outreach to Russia primarily born out of a necessity to counter India's growing clout within the region especially after Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between India and United States which seeks to make India 'Linchpin' of US Interests in the region. (Lead from behind) Indian access to US weapons alongside US support for Indian operations in the sea – Indian Ocean - send an alarming signal to Islamabad to recalibrate its international relations and increase its outreach to regional powers to counter prospective Indian hegemony on the region.

Afghanistan is also the place where Pakistan and Indian interests are in collision course. Naveed Mukhtar, current Director General of Pakistan's premier intelligence agency ISI, in his academic thesis discussed Pakistan's position pertaining to Afghanistan: 'Pakistan's past, present and future is closely linked with Afghanistan. A peaceful, united and stable Afghanistan is critical for Pakistan's security and is a top policy objective. At the same time, Pakistan needs to prevent the opening of another hostile front should Afghanistan emerge as a proxy for India. Consequently, Pakistan will closely follow India's efforts to influence Afghanistan and may take aggressive measures to undermine India's efforts in this regard'.

Therefore, Pakistan politically interactive relations with China and Russia also serve its interests while preserving and protecting their interests accordingly of stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Pakistan by virtue of its geographical location can also be served as a fulcrum to glue various economic blocs together. Mutual concerns regarding Indian expanding ties with the US and its power theatrics in neighborhood along with growing insecurity in Afghanistan, Pakistan is the natural ally of China and Russia whose interests regarding Afghanistan stability and arresting US 'Pivot to Asia' are driving factors behind the emerging triangular power relation.

## Conclusion

The emerging triangularly interactive power relationship of China, Russia and Pakistan offers an opportunity for each of them to galvanize the regional players into bilateral and multilateral relationships to gain significant economic dividends from the prospects of prosperity that each of three represents. Concurrently, the triangular power relation should also be cautious regarding the malignant designs of some power players which seeks to inculcate distrust and acrimony among them. In view of this, the trio could explore numerous options to mitigate any potential attempt to drive a wedge among them. Range of mechanisms could be developed jointly including establishing hotlines between the capitals to enhance communication for developing trust and confidence.

This triangular power relation with its overlapping security, infrastructural, energy, trade, economic and institutional interests has all the political capital and economic ingredients in it to exercise a larger role in the region through trans-continental integrative projects therefore serving as a decisive power relation in redefining the Orient.

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