

SINO-RUSSIAN DÉTENTE AND ITS IMPACT ON PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

Currently, China and Russia are not only normal neighbours rather their strategic, security and political equation is also unmatched. Fifty two years ago, relations between Moscow and Peking were at their lowest ebb as border clashes between the two communist neighbours had erupted and Sino-Soviet rivalry had not only divided the communist world, it also provided a valuable opportunity to the West, particularly the United States to take advantage of division. For Pakistan, thaw in Sino-Russian relations emerged as a positive sign because of past discord between Islamabad and Moscow all the way from the cold war days till the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989. The paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations made it possible for Pakistan to mend fences with Moscow and enhance its foreign policy depth by broadening the scope of Pak-Russian relations by including strategic, security and military ties. This paper examines in detail how paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations had an impact on Pakistan's foreign and security policy and to what extent Russia, despite past differences with Pakistan, reciprocated new warmth in ties with Islamabad.

Keywords: Sino-Soviet Rivalry, Sino-Russian Détente, U-2 Incident, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Dependence.

Introduction

There are no permanent enemies and no permanent friends but only interests which matter in International Relations, World Politics and Foreign Policy. This dictum, which was relevant in the past, is also a reality today and will continue to be a hard truth in the years to come. It is an undeniable fact as far as Sino-Russian relations are concerned. In May 1989¹, the then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev paid a landmark visit to Beijing which coincided with widespread student protest against the authoritarian rule of Chinese communist

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government. Yet, the visit of Gorbachev paved the way for mending of fences in Sino-Soviet relations and later on after the disintegration of USSR in December 1991 dynamics of Beijing-Moscow relations changed significantly. Sino-Soviet détente gradually mitigated tension between the two communist neighbors and led to a positive impact on Asian security.²

Today, China and Russia are not only normal neighbors rather their strategic, security and political equation is also quite strong. Fifty two years ago, relations between Moscow and Peking were at their lowest level as border clashes between the two communist neighbors had flared up and Sino-Soviet rivalry had not only split the communist world but also provided a valuable opportunity to the West, particularly the United States to exploit that division.³ Therefore,

China's geostrategic position worsened further after the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, so its link with Pakistan as a back door to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East became a vital foreign policy concern. China in return supported Pakistan's position in Kashmir so as to tie up India in South Asia and to befriend Muslim neighbors of its own Muslim-dominated and violence-ridden Xinjiang and the wider West Asian/Middle Eastern Muslim region.⁴

Twenty years following the worst schism between China and the Soviet Union, in 1989, steady normalization process was unleashed between the two former communist powers and in 2021, one can observe Moscow and Beijing nexus a reality and a major strategic transformation in the post-cold war era.

For Pakistan, thaw in Sino-Russian relations emerged as an optimistic sign because of past cleavages between Islamabad and Moscow all the way from the cold war days till the Soviet military exit from Afghanistan in February 1989. The paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations made it possible for Pakistan to mend fences with Moscow and amplify its foreign policy depth by broadening the scope of Pak-Russian relations by including strategic, security and military ties. For the first time in the history of Pak-Russian relations, joint military exercises codenamed 'Druzhba'⁵ were held and Russia rendered its support to Pakistan for its inclusion in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

This paper will examine in detail how paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations had an implication on Pakistan's foreign and security policy and to what extent Russia, despite past discords with Pakistan, reciprocated new cordiality in

ties with Islamabad. Some of the questions which will be raised and responded in this paper are:

- Why and how Sino-Russian détente is called major *development* in international affairs?
- To what extent Sino-Russian *détente* is a factor in Pak-India relations?
- How Sino-Russian détente facilitated the *process* of Pak-Russian détente?
- How Sino-Russian détente is having an *impact* on Pakistan Foreign policy?

New Delhi and Moscow possess entrenched ties since the inception of India as a new state in August 1947. When Pakistan decided to join the Western alliance system of Baghdad Pact in 1954 (renamed as Central Treaty Organization, in 1958) and South East Asian Treaty Organization in 1955, India decided to remain neutral in East-West rivalry and followed a policy of non-alignment. The intensifying of Indo-Soviet ties during 1950s was mainly in response to Pakistan's alliance with the U.S during the cold war. Ending its policy of neutrality *vis-a-vis* Indo-Pak and Pak-Afghan conflicts, during the visit of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to New Delhi and Kabul in January 1956, Moscow supported India and Afghanistan on Kashmir and Pakhtoonistan issues with Pakistan. Had Pakistan not joined anti-Communist alliance system primarily focused against the Soviet bloc, relations between Islamabad and Moscow would have remained normal. The U-2 incident of May 1960⁶, when an American espionage plane took off from the U.S military base in Peshawar was shot down in the Soviet Central Asia and its pilot captured, the Soviet Union gave a strong warning to Islamabad to refrain from assisting America of espionage in the USSR. Later on, the American base was closed down.

This paper will also explore the likelihood of further strengthening of Pak-Russian ties in the light of Sino-Russian equation. Furthermore, the paper will analyze positive influence on Pakistan's foreign policy in the light of Sino-Russian détente in contemporary setting.

Dynamics of Sino-Russian Détente

From a real politics perspective, there are six major features of Sino-Russian détente and its implications on South Asia, Asian and world politics. First,

decades of discord over territorial matters and Chinese allegations that the Russian Czarist rule occupied vast areas of Chinese territory, turned ugly when in March 1969 there were serious border clashes resulting into deaths of hundreds of soldiers from both sides. As rightly specified by Chris Miller in his article, “The New Cold War’s Warm Friends:”

Since Russia and China held their first major diplomatic talks in 1689, the two countries have often been at odds. Russia occupied a large chunk of northern China in the late 1850s. It invaded China’s Xinjiang borderland in 1871 and seized Chinese Manchuria in 1900. The 20th century was no more peaceful, as the Soviet Union funded and armed revolutionaries in China and invaded Manchuria and Xinjiang once again in the 1920s and 1930s. China’s attack on Soviet border guards in 1969, in other words, was one in a long, long series of Russian-Chinese wars.⁷

There is no doubt about historical dimension of Sino-Russian relations but since 1989, the two countries decided to freeze their territorial conflicts and embark on the holding of normalization process. Chris Miller further argues that, “yet today Russia and China are working together more closely than at any time since the Korean War of 1950. They cooperate at the United Nations, seeking to defy Western priorities. Russia is selling China advanced military kit, including S-400 surface-to-air missiles. They support authoritarianism in Central Asia and further afield. The two countries hold joint military exercises from the Baltic to the South China Sea. Russia’s 2018 Vostok military exercise on its eastern border included 3,200 personnel from China—a clear signal that Russia’s military does not see China as a near-term adversary. And Russia recently shifted a big quantum of its foreign currency reserves into Chinese currency as a hedge against U.S. sanctions”.⁸ Almost, on all the issues engulfing Asia and the world, China and Russia take a similar position which is opposite to what their policies were four decades ago. The recent being their opposition to enforce strict measures against military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021.

Second, Sino-Russian relations thrived during the era of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Chinese President Xi Jinping as the two leaders expressed their eagerness to closely work together in order to challenge America’s perceived tutelage in world affairs. Therefore, it is rightly argued that, “China and Russia are an imposing duo when they want to challenge the United States in international organizations or amid crises like that in Venezuela. Yet derailing Beijing and Moscow’s friendship would not be simple, although America’s confrontation with Russia and China would limit the two countries’ benefit to align. It is more likely

that Washington will choose to wait, hoping that that Beijing or Moscow change course first. President's Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have invested heavily in their relationship. It is possible to conceive a domestic political swing as large as those that have historically forced changes in the Russia-China relationship. Yet as both countries edge ever closer to having presidents-for-life, it is not a good time to bet on sharp shifts. Xi and Putin are guarantors of their countries' friendship. Neither president looks tilted to change his mind—or to leave his post”.⁹

Unlike 1950s when Communist China objected about Soviet hegemony, the situation today is totally different. Sino-Soviet ‘alliance’ which existed from 1949 till 1959, has now been replaced with relative partnership. Therefore, as vividly stated in *The Economist* that “Mr. Putin can point to several arguments for his partnership with China, in addition to their joint hostility to the liberal projects. One is expediency. Western sanctions, imposed after his annexation of Crimea, the meddling in American elections in 2016 and the lethal use of a nerve agent in Britain two years later, have left Russia without any alternatives. Mr. Xi has also given Russia cover of its military action in Syria and, to some extent, Crimea. And in, contrast to the end of the 17th century, when Peter the Great looked to Europe as the wellspring of progress, Mr. Putin can wisely argue that the future now belongs to China and its system of state capitalism.”¹⁰ Russia, as a European country with two-third of its land situated in Asia subscribes to the idea that 21st century will be an “Asian century.”

If there is a leadership change in Moscow or in Beijing only then one can expect change in Sino-Russian détente in negative direction.¹¹ Yet, both countries do realize the fact that they cannot return to the politics of schism and confrontation which existed five decades ago. Third, Sino-Russian détente is viewed as a necessity rather than a matter of choice or obligation because the two world powers are aware of the fact that unless they develop a similar approach on vital global issues, it will be a hard task to challenge the so-called American dominated world order. Therefore, both Moscow and Beijing possess harmony of views on the U.S-Iran schism, American threats to North Korea, civil war in Syria, political turmoil in Myanmar and the US pressure over the regime in Venezuela. The two powers also support each other on Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Chinese policy of de-radicalization in its restless province of Xinxiang.

Sino-Russian détente is also evident in their partnership under the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). As a security

arrangement, SCO is led by China and Russia with other members extending from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan. Observers in SCO are Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus and Mongolia. As a symbol of Sino-Russian détente in strategic matters, SCO focuses on push against terrorism, separatism and extremism. Almost, all the members of SCO are grappling with threats of religious militancy and radicalization which Russia and China as the pivotal members of SCO are committed to eliminate what Russia and China term as the 'three evils.'

If one traces the official Chinese and Russian position on various regional and international issues, a general consensus is manifested. Till the end of the cold war China and Russia were engaged in serious allegations and counter allegations. In 1980, China had put three conditions to normalize its relations with the USSR. First, withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Second, stopping support to the Vietnamese backed regime in Cambodia. Third, returning the territories which China alleged were occupied by Russia during Czarist time.

Amazingly, Beijing didn't mention its most important source of conflict with Moscow i.e. the aberration of Soviet leadership from Marxism calling the Soviet communist party following a revisionist path. Out of three conditions, two were fulfilled i.e. the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan and an end to Moscow's support to the Vietnamese supported regime in Cambodia. But, the third condition was not met and China agreed to put territorial dispute with Russia in back burner and decided to normalize relations with Moscow. Fourth, the focus of Sino-Russian détente is based on political will and determination from both sides that only through good neighborly relations and useful cooperation the two sides can fill the vacuum in global politics. The diminishing power of the United States is certainly creating void in global order which both Russia and China hope to fill and transform the world from unipolar to multi-polar. Both Russia and China are nuclear states and also permanent members of the UN Security Council. The two neighbors are of the view that in the prevailing global scenario, there are more plusses than minuses if their détente is further strengthened. As rightly said by Feng Yujun that, "the most important relationship for us is the one with America. We don't want to echo the mistakes of Stalin and Mao. Russia is more dependent on China than China is on Russia."¹² China and Russia took a long time to send congratulatory message to Joseph Biden on winning American presidential elections held on November 3, 2020. Both Moscow and Beijing are now in the process of formulating a policy on dealing with the

post-Trump era as Joseph Biden has made it clear that America will play a leadership role and not allow challenging powers to take advantage of the U.S domestic issues.

China is not what it was during 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In those days, China lacked the power to influence world order and the USSR was far ahead than Peoples Republic of China in military, industrial, technological, economic and political areas. The newly established Peoples Republic of China in October 1949 was very dependent on the Soviet Union economically and militarily. However, the paradigm shift in Sino-Russian relations ensued as the latter became dependent on the former. In its editorial, “brothers in arms” in July 27-August 2 issue, *The Economist* (London) mentioned that,

But the real news is how rapidly Russia is becoming dependent on its giant neighbor. China is a vital market for Russian raw materials; Rosneft, Russia's national oil company, depends on Chinese financing and is increasingly diverting its oil to China. As Russia seeks to evade the hegemony of the dollar, the yuan is becoming a bigger part of its foreign currency reserves. China supplies vital components for Russia's advanced weapon systems. And China is the source of the networking and security gear that Mr. Putin needs to control his people.¹³

It is argued in *The Economist's* lead article “The Junior Partner” that, “more practically, in 1949, Mao was a junior partner whom Stalin felt he could control. Today, Mr. Xi holds majority of the cards. As late as 1989, the Soviet Union's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was more than twice the size of China. Today China's GDP is six times larger than Russia's, measures at purchasing-power parity. Russia is tenth among China's export markets, a little above the Philippines but well below India. China is Russia's second-largest export market after EU. It buys more Russian oil than any other country.”¹⁴ With the fall of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Russian federation as a successor state of USSR took several years to reclaim its power. By that time, China made a great leap forward in economic field and emerged as the world's second economic power. Whereas, Russian federation is lagging behind China as far a matching economic status with Beijing is concerned. Now, unlike the past, China has no feeling of insecurity or inferiority vis-a-vis Russia because it feels confident in maintaining its economic edge with Moscow in the years to come. Fifth, Sino-Russian détente, despite its grey areas, will be further enhanced in the years to come because of serious leadership crisis at the global level. Both Russia and

China need each other to guard their vital national security interests namely in Central Asia, West Asia and in North East Asia.

Central Asia is no doubt a source of conflict and cooperation for Russia and China. Beijing's 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative along with China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are not contested by Russia but Moscow views growing Chinese influence in Asia harmful to its interests.¹⁵ So far, Russia is cooperating with China as far as OBOR and CPEC are concerned but Chinese growing economic activity in the Russian Far Eastern region and Siberia are not taken positively by Moscow. Yet, the two countries, despite their ostensible clash of interests along their border regions, feel determined not to risk their hard earned détente.

In its cover story, "The junior partner" in *The Economist* issue of July 27-August 2, 2019, it is rightly mentioned that, "Russia still considers Central Asia, which the Tsars colonized in the 19th century, its backyard, especially in military affairs. Hence, Tajikistan's membership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led alliance. As long as China's interest in the region remained mostly in the realm of investment, it was fine for Russia, even welcome. But by 2016, if not before, Chinese army units had begun to appear in Tajikistan, ostensibly to watch over the Wakhan Corridor – a strip of Afghanistan that separates Tajikistan from Pakistan. Later that year China launched a war game with Tajik army, some of whose younger officers have been trained in Shanghai."¹⁶

Finally, the paradigm shift as a sequel to the end of the cold war and the resurgence of Russia under Vladimir Putin is not seen as a source of instability by China. Political realism shape the Chinese Foreign Policy since its 'open door policy' unleashed in the post-Mao era and reinforced by Deng Xiaoping. The bottom line of new Chinese policy after 1979 strictly follows a policy of non-intervention and non-interference in the affairs of other countries and maintains normal relations with neighbors. Consequently, the last war which China fought was forty two years ago when it invaded Vietnam in January 1979 but withdrew its forces after some time. Since then China has not got itself engaged in any armed conflict with any of their neighbors albeit some border skirmishes with India in the last few years.

Likewise, pragmatism to some extent is also reflected in Russian foreign policy except its interventionist approach in Ukraine; in other former Soviet

republics and in Syria by supporting the regime of Bashar al Assad. Nevertheless, it is in the interest of both Russia and China to sustain their policy of détente in order to keep the United States at bay and fill the void which is being created as a result of the weakening of American power albeit Biden-Kamala administration's resolve to play a leadership role in world affairs.

Impact on Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Strategic Thought Process

For the first time in the history of Pak-Russian relations, one can comprehend the longest spell of normal ties coupled with in-depth strategic, security and military relations. Pakistan's strategic advantage after the end of the cold war is the unleashing of Sino-Russian normalization process. During the cold war days, Pakistan had good equation with the People's Republic of China and India had multi-dimensional ties with the then USSR. If Pakistan had an alliance with the United States which led to aggressive reaction from Moscow, India is a beneficiary of the end of the cold war as it switched sides and developed close relations with the United States leading to the civil nuclear deal in 2005. For Pakistan, India's warmth with America was not fully approved by the Russian federation which provided a valuable opportunity for mending fences in Pak-Russian ties.

Now, China and Russia to a large extent share similar strategic and security perceptions on global affairs and unlike the past is an example of good neighborly relations. Pakistan, which in the past had to reformulate its foreign policy objectives according to the dynamics of Moscow-Beijing ties feel comfortable with Sino-Russian détente. How the bettering of ties between China and Russia provide space to Pakistan in view of Indo-U.S nexus need to be analyzed in some detail. The emerging *Russia-China-Pakistan Triangle* is a reality and has much to do with the strengthening of Sino-Russian détente.

Pakistan's foreign policy has got some space in the midst of Sino-Russian normalization process and growing Indo-U.S ties. The credit to promote strategic rethinking in Moscow about Pakistan to some extent goes to China as it considers India as its strong competitor in the region. Therefore, it is argued that, "Pakistan and China are very close friends with strategic cooperation in several micro and macro level economic projects and military related fields. China has been persistent in supporting Pakistan's role in the "war on terror". It has firmly supported Pakistan in all matters in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

To assist Pakistan in dealing with US pressures for doing more “in the war on terror”, China’s support for Pakistan’s stance has been strong. They have successfully resolved their border disputes and for the last many years they have had close politico-economic and strategic cooperation. In the recent times Russia and China have reflected very close coordination and cooperation on the Syrian domestic conflict and Iran’s nuclear program. In the light of their very warm relations China is likely to welcome the development of close relations between Pakistan and Russia except the possibility of China and Russia’s clash of economic interests in Pakistan which the latter will have to guard against by being aware of China’s sensitivities regarding its commercial and strategic interests”.¹⁷

The emerging triangle consisting of China, Russia and Pakistan needs to be analyzed from three perspectives. First, the transformation of world order from unipolar to multipolar with Russia and China as two major poles is in the interest of Pakistan so that it can cope with American pressures and its coercive demand to ‘do more’ in the U.S so-called war on terror particularly in the case of Afghanistan. Unlike the cold war years when Pakistan and the then Soviet Union, excluding brief spells of normalization, had hostile relations, one can witness a sea change in Pak-Russian relations in the last two decades. Although, the Russian President Vladimir Putin cancelled his visit to Islamabad in October 2012¹⁸ because of technical reasons, Pak-Russian ties remained normal. In April, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Islamabad which reflected growing Pak-Russian ties ranging from economic, security, strategic to developing consensus on dealing with contentious issue of Afghanistan.¹⁹ It seems, there is coordination between China and Russia on the one hand and Pakistan and China on the other as far as Islamabad’s approach to Moscow is concerned.

Paranoia, mistrust, suspicion and ill-will which shaped Pak-Soviet relations since early 1950s till the disintegration of the Soviet Union have been replaced with mutual trust, better understanding and pursuit of a win-win situation. One issue which both China and Russia want to address vehemently is religious extremism as both the neighbors are vulnerable to the threat of instability and violence in the name of religion. China’s concern is its Muslim sensitive province of Xinxiang where since years the policy of indoctrination and assimilation followed by Beijing to tame Uighur population is done by establishing various ‘rehabilitation centers.’²⁰ Likewise, Russia is also concerned about the so-called threat of Islamic extremists in Chechnya where for years bloodbath between Russian forces and Chechen rebels took the toll of thousands of lives. Earlier,

during the reign of President Boris Yeltsin, Russia had expressed its apprehension over Pakistan's alleged support to Chechen rebels but that issue was resolved with the passage of time and currently Moscow has no such grievance against Islamabad. Pakistan handed over Chechnya rebels to Russia in 2004 who were arrested on Pak-Afghan border. Moscow welcomed such a Pakistani gesture.

Pakistan has pursued a neutral approach *vis-a-vis* the Chinese policy of de-radicalization in its province of Xinjiang because of close Sino-Pak ties and the understanding which holds between Russia and China over dealing with what is termed by SCO as separatism, extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism.

Second, one can somewhat agree with the saying that Pakistan's road to Moscow passes through Beijing because it is China's clout over Russia which matters in today's world. And, China wants to act as a bridge between Pakistan and Russia so that the United States and India, which are the two major competitors of China in Asia are counter balanced. It seems, Russia is not happy with India that during Modi regime the BJP government has put all the eggs in one basket by tilting in favor of the United States. Moscow possesses resentment against Washington that it is siding with Europe as far as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 is concerned. The imposition of sanctions by the United States and the West against Russia and excluding it from G-8 tends to further broaden the wedge between Moscow and Washington. In this scenario, Russia approves Pakistan's discontent with the United States on Afghanistan and counter terrorism measures.

Unlike the past, Russia has not tilted in favor of India as far as ending special status of Jammu & Kashmir enshrined in article 370 of the Indian constitution is concerned. In a discussion held in the UN Security Council in September 2019 over Kashmir crisis, Russia was not openly supporting India's position on revoking article 370 and lock down of its occupied territory of J&K by imposing curfew, communication linkages like internet and serious human rights' violation. Third, Russia needs to pull itself out of the pressure of the United States and the West by reaching out to countries having a history of enmity like Pakistan. Reciprocation of Pakistan to Russian warmth and mending fences of Pak-Russian relations is to the advantage of China and is a direct consequence of Sino-Russian détente.

Yet, Pakistan and Russia must remain consistent as far as the positive transformation of their relations is concerned by replacing the bitterness of the past and moving with a forward looking approach. Russian interest for peace in Afghanistan and its active role for a diplomatic engagement including Taliban is an outcome of strategic brainstorming involving Pakistan, Russia and China.

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