Issue Map V

Developments in Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership and its Implications for India

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About the Author

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Sino Soviet split in 1960, relations between the Soviet Union and China were tense. Certain ideological disagreements led to the split, which remains one of the most consequential events in Cold War history. This period was characterized by national and political differences between the two leading Communist political parties, as well as a seven-month undeclared border conflict. Relations returned to a semblance of normalcy during the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. After the breakup of the USSR in 1991, relations under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin steadily improved. This steady improvement in relations was seen as among the most significant diplomatic turnarounds in the last decade of the 20th Century. With improvement in bilateral understanding, both countries saw the possibility of not only an opportunity to strengthen political relations but also envisioned the prospect of greater economic and military engagement between them. At the same time, these ties were largely driven by subtle rivalry and caution, motivated by geopolitical ambitions in Eurasia, and by mutual suspicion with regard to the development of military technology. In the early 2000s, the two countries finally resolved their border dispute allowing them to focus attention on issues of mutual interest. This has ensured that the two countries have been able to consolidate their relations in all spheres, much to the concern of other global powers, especially in the West.

Following the Western reaction to the crisis surrounding Ukraine in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin has recalibrated his approach towards Asia, taking into consideration the advantages of Asian support, coordination of policy and expansion of trade initiatives. President Putin has reached out to ASEAN to expand trade and investment.\(^1\) Trade between ASEAN countries and the Eurasian Economic Union (predominantly consisting of Russia) grew by 46% in 2017, a clear indicator of the strengthening of economic ties between ASEAN countries and Russia. Significant moves have been made in relations with Japan as well. During the ASEAN summit held in Singapore in November 2018, President Putin held talks with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Discussions also included the territorial dispute of Kuril Islands, which has been standing in the way of the signing of a peace treaty between the two nations.

However, the most significant development in Putin's relations with Asia is what has been termed as the comprehensive engagement with China. 2018 has marked a more definite change in this bilateral relationship. China has been steadily emerging as one of the most advanced military powers, qualitatively strengthening its forces and proving to be a potential competitor for the U.S. This, combined with the looming threat of Russian military power has prompted a recalibration of American defense strategy. More recently, China purchased fighter jets and missile equipment from Russia, which resulted in punitive measures from the U.S. Between 11th and 17th of September 2018, Russia hosted a large-scale military exercise involving China, conducted throughout Siberia and Russia's Far East. The success of these military exercises (Vostok 2018), combined with increased bilateral ties, has indicated a strengthening of strategic relations between Russia and China. As a result of pressure of non compliance with the Trump administration and a number of other factors, including Putin's attempts to diversify relations, incentive has been created for Russia and China to align their policies closer.

Undoubtedly, this comes with many implications, not just involving the US. While the increased bilateral relations pose as a strong threat for the Trump administration, this article will also focus on its implications on India. The Sino-Indian border issue is as yet unresolved. Additionally, there are other concerns of a strategic and economic nature. In this light, the nature of Delhi’s foreign policy is such that it attempts to balance China in the region. Sino Indian relations have also been shaped by factors of trying to assert themselves as the more reliable regional power for smaller countries in South Asia. At the same time, India has over the years maintained strong military and diplomatic ties with Russia. This has come under the scrutiny of some of India's most important partners such as the U.S. The increased coordination of policy between China and Russia may potentially hold adverse effects on the relations between Delhi and Moscow.

Outside of military ties, certain significant economic and political developments have also taken place between Russia and China. Recently, there has been talk of Russia and China synergizing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), with an agreement between PRC and EAEU having been signed in May 2018. According to Chinese political leaders, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has proven to be an effective platform for the two countries to discuss the implementation of concrete projects to strengthen their economic cooperation over the

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years. On the sidelines of the G 20 summit in Buenos Aires which took place on the 30th of November and 1st of December 2018, the leaders of India, China and Russia convened for the first time in twelve years on such a platform to discuss converging global concerns and cooperation in various areas.

The observed equations as seen above give rise to the following questions:

1. What are the reasons which have led to the strengthening of the strategic relations between Russia and China? What are the most significant developments in Sino Russian relations contributing to this comprehensive partnership, and what could potentially affect it?

2. What are the implications of the increasing closeness of Russia and China, on India?

Russia and China, once considered adversaries, are now emerging as partners. In 2014, Russia realised the importance of opening up its natural resources market to China, as an attempt to reach out to China stemming from a need for both political and economic support. Since the Trump presidency, a mutual dissatisfaction with American policy is considered as what has largely served as incentive towards the strengthening of the partnership. The trade war waged by Trump against China since (2018) provided Russia with new opportunities to enter the Chinese market. And it equally benefited China to have a reliable political and economic partner in Russia governed by a strategic undertone in their relationship.

Despite the fact that the relationship between the two countries has been viewed as being largely characterized by mistrust, attempts are being made to enhance political and strategic mutual trust through the expansion of trade and economic policy. On the 8th of November 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev got together to discuss enhanced all round cooperation, and the synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Eurasian Economic Union. Cooperation in areas of innovation, e commerce, agriculture, energy, nuclear energy and transportation were also discussed. While this will have been the 23rd regular meeting between the Russian and Chinese heads of government, its significance lies in the fact that this meeting underlined the mutual trust between, serving as, in Li Keqiang’s (Premier of State Council of PRC) words, “a link between the past and the future”.

Economic Cooperation- A Geopolitical Game Changer?

Gas pipeline initiatives on the economic front, exceedingly significant developments have been taking place between the two countries in terms of natural gas links. Two pipelines are being built between Russia and China, the Altai pipeline between Western Siberia and North Western China, as well as the Power of Siberia pipeline from Vladivostok to the Chinese border. These projects are close to completion and the pipelines are expected to be launched in late 2019. Described as a geopolitical game changer, the two gas pipeline projects are an indication of the booming energy relations between the two countries during the past decade. Gazprom has signed a 30 year contract with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), for the supply of 1.3 trillion cubic feet of natural gas to China annually, potentially making China the largest importer of natural gas by the end of 2019.\(^4\) The increased energy linkage between the two countries is not only of huge economic significance, but is also an indication of the independence of European nations from Russia's natural resources market.

Chinese involvement in Siberia, Russia's Far East and the Arctic

Siberia and Russia's Far East are increasingly being viewed as conducive environments for Chinese investment. The region has been undergoing an infrastructure building boom, with road and railway construction taking place in border areas close to Northeast China. While China has viewed itself as the obvious partner to the Far East, Russia has viewed Chinese ambitions with a certain amount of skepticism. There has long been the theory of the Chinese takeover of the Far East in Russian rhetoric, which has more recently been dispelled as a myth. Economic incentives for Chinese workers in the region have been steadily decreasing since 2017, as there has been an outpour of immigrants from Central Asian nations. Transformations have been made as a result of Chinese investment and coordinated development initiatives to alleviate the quality of life in these sparsely populated regions. The development of Siberia and the Russian Far East is now increasingly being viewed as Russia's door to Asia, and as a major step towards the creation of stronger Eurasia, which has often been mentioned both in conjunction with and as competition to the BRI initiative. During the Eastern Economic Forum which took place in Vladivostok on September 11th 2018, crossroads on the New Silk Road were discussed, where Moscow expressed an increasing desire to link the BRI with the EAEU in order to achieve <<a greater Eurasian Partnership>>, through a convergence of the EAEU, ASEAN and SCO. The core element of this will remain the Russia China strategic partnership.

Additionally, China has involved itself in the Arctic, where its investment will be crucial in order to tap energy sources. While the Kremlin is well aware of the fact that Chinese involvement in the surrounding areas could potentially be a breach to Russian sovereignty, there is strategic advantage in coordinating with China to develop Arctic resources. In January of 2018, China released its first white paper on the Arctic, in which brought to the forefront China’s position, goals and policy in the Arctic. The paper also expressed China’s interest in working with <<other Arctic states>>, in order to jointly build a Polar Silk Road.


Acting on these interests, PetroChina has been working in collaboration with Russia’s Yamal Natural Gas Plant and on other offshore Arctic projects, an indication of the “Silk Road going on Ice”\(^8\). China was made member of the Arctic Council in May 2013 and has subsequently been working with Russia collaboratively on LPG gas projects in the region. China’s role acting as investor in Arctic projects and actively involving itself in the governance of the region has grown. This has helped the growth of Russian projects in the region, but has also raised questions about China being a rule maker and a threat in the region.\(^9\) However, Chinese involvement in the development of the region has been indispensable, and the Chinese view the Polar Silk Road as an opportunity to boost Eurasian economies and enable regional integration.

**Strengthened partnership through multilateral institutions, on the sidelines and at face value**

Following the Russia-China Joint Statement of 2016, there has been increased dialogue and interaction through multilateral institutions. This has contributed to the focus of the joint statement, further enabling the “comprehensive partnership between Europe and Asia on the basis of openness, transparency and consideration of each other’s interests”. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), primarily led by China and Russia, has provided plenty of opportunity for dialogue on trade, investment and development cooperation between the two countries. It has also served as a platform used by the heads of the two respective governments to demonstrate an unprecedentedly close relationship. In July 2017, President Putin presented President Xi with the highest Russian Award, the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle. Xi characterised the moment as «the best period in the history of Chinese-Russian comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation». In June 2018, Xi Jinping presented Putin with the Friendship Medal. Various business deals were announced, including a joint investment fund for projects involving both countries. Both leaders also expressed their respective intentions in maintaining their influence over North Korea, which has been a global point of contention, involving the convergence of their interests in their dissatisfaction with the Trump administration. Additionally, the leaders have met under multiple

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\(^9\)Global Times. “China’s Role in Arctic Governance ‘Cannot Be Ignored’.“ *Global Times*, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1128626.shtml.
occasions along the sidelines of other multilateral conferences, including the G20 and the Eastern Economic Forum. Both Putin and Xi have attempted to use multilateral forums as an instrument to not only further foreign policy, but also to demonstrate themselves as accommodating towards their respective strategic partners.

Participating recently in the 23rd St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2019, Presidents Xi Jinping and Putin along with their representatives have reiterated the importance of multilateralism. A strong opposition to unilateralism was demonstrated, which they claimed is a method practiced by the US in pursuance of trade protectionism.\textsuperscript{10} It was further concluded that the stage of cooperation that the two nations have entered is unprecedented and has reached the highest level in the history of Sino Russian bilateral ties. President Putin and President Xi agreed to upgrade their relationship further to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era, in line with the “new era” characteristics post the 19th CPC National Party congress of October 2018. Much discussion surrounded the attempts being made by the two countries to oppose protectionism during the G20 summit in June 2019, and the support they sought to gain in the process. As the Trump Xi trade war reached yet another standstill at the end of the summit, the strong front the two countries have put on at a multilateral level has been reaffirmed.

It can be inferred that the two nations and their leaders have placed a great amount of importance in multilateral processes and find value in the role they play in strengthening relations. While concrete steps are being taken to further strengthen economic ties, the demonstration of a warm friendship between the leaders and aligned interests cannot simply be taken at face value. The warmth in relations demonstrated at these multilateral institutions was, is in the words of Putin, <<in the spirit of overarching strategic partnership>>, which will remain the core element of the ties.

**Military Cooperation**

*It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions. ....Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department, and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of*

\textsuperscript{10}Global Times. “China, Russia Can Promote Multilateralism.” *Global Times*, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1153590.shtml.
the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.


China’s highly significant qualitative military development coupled with Russia’s antagonization of the West has prompted a recalibration in American Defense Strategy. The U.S has deprioritized the War on Terror for the reemergence of long term strategic competition with China and Russia, who have been collectively referred to as the revisionist powers.12 The combined strength of Sino Russian military forces is perceived as a real threat by some, or viewed as a baseless demonstration by others, especially in the context of constituting a viable threat to global security. However, it has been made clear by global powers that action reaction measures have and will be taken in light of this. It is therefore important to acknowledge the latest developments in military cooperation between the two countries, which is crucial to their comprehensive engagement.

Russian, Chinese, and Mongolian national flags set on armored vehicles develop in the wind during the military exercises Vostok 2018 in Eastern Siberia, Russia (Sept. 13, 2018)

Source, AP Photo/Sergei Grits, thediplomat.com


The Vostok military games of 2018, are significant for multiple reasons, many of which not purely in the military context. The Chinese Liberation Army participated for the first time in a series of drills in Russia’s Far East, involving exercises in combat preparedness, command, and control of joint operations. The sheer magnitude of the exercises reported, makes it one of the largest military exercises having taken place since 1981, coming under close scrutiny of the West. From a Chinese perspective, the war games provided new insights in terms of interoperability with the Russian military, as well as plenty of opportunity to learn from each other and further cooperate. The forces sent by Xi Jinping were largely symbolic and illustrate a military bond which has been created between the two armed forces. These games have signified the creation of a Sino Russian military alliance and have helped Russia demonstrate to the West that Moscow is not militarily isolated, with China as an ally. Vostok-2018 was seen as Russia’s largest military exercise with 3,200 Chinese troops training alongside some 300,000 Russians in eastern Siberia. The exercise was supposed to improve interoperability between Russian and Chinese forces.

Cooperation in the military technical sector has also steadily increased between Russia and China since 2010. With both countries improving their conventional military capabilities, military technology has been identified as an area of focus for the strengthening of relations. Russia sold around US$15 billion worth of weapons to China in 2017, including the S400 defence missile systems, which are also being sold to India. China accounts for around 6% of all sale of weapons from Russia, joining India, and Saudi Arabia in the list of importers of arms. other technology being sold to China includes Sukhoi SU 35 fighter aircrafts, Kamov multirole helicopters, AL 31F engines, and D 30 aircraft engines. China’s purchase of the S400s from Russia was met with sanctions from the U.S in September 2018. While China is looking to strengthen its military capabilities with the help of Russia, it is not prepared to compromise its relationship with the U.S, treading lightly post the sanctions. The strengthened Sino Russian military relationship continues to be viewed as part of the return of the great power competition by the U.S, considered a threat to the current international order. While both the sale of weapons and the exchange of technology between Russia and China

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has been flourishing, the actual value of what was sold in 2017 was very similar to the figures in 2016, thus indicating that there has not been a significant increase.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sale of weapons from Russia to China in 2016</th>
<th>$790 million (approximation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sale of weapons from Russia to China in 2017</td>
<td>$859 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The readjustment of global strategy is thus providing incentive for Beijing and Moscow to work closely together on the military front. China has also been of vital support to Russia in the face of the NATO as well, whose tensions with Russia have steadily increased since the Crimean incident in

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In October of 2018, Trump decided to withdraw the United States from the INF treaty, the signing of which contributed to the end of the Cold War in 1987. This treaty prohibited the development, testing and possession of certain types of missiles, both conventional and nuclear. The abrogation of the INF by the USA has brought with it implications to the US-Russia and Russia-China-US interplay.\(^\text{18}\) The US decision to pull out of the treaty has put an immense amount of additional pressure on the NATO, which will have to work extensively in engaging in constructive conversation with Russian representatives with regard to arms control. Additionally, this decision has possibly been stimulated by the increasing attempts China has made to extend its influence in the Pacific Ocean, the consequences of which can be seen in the ongoing tensions in the South China sea. The possibility of the US developing cruise missiles across Asia Pacific is a significant threat to Beijing, which may force it to reassess the security of mainland China.

The deep divisions formed between Russia and the West has created much incentive for Russia to look towards China militarily. Proving a strategic and strong military partner, China has taken full advantage of the situation. Vostok 2018 symbolically marked a new era of military cooperation for the two countries, as it became apparent that common interests and political necessity has provided reason for the two militaries to come closer together. Each of the two nations has prepared to demonstrate to the other their full capability in the defense of their sovereignty, a truly concrete step towards future military cooperation.

**Factors which could potentially affect the strategic partnership**

China has proven to have played a vital role for Russia since 2014, in terms of serving as a support to Russia and aiding it in upholding its vital interests. This does not take away from the fact that the underlying characteristic of Sino Russian relations has been the question of *mutual trust*, or lack thereof. Within the Russian establishment, there have been diverging views towards relations with China. The modern view states that a new global situation has arisen, making it an opportunity for Russia to move forward and expand relations, while the more traditional stream of thought is based on the fact that China should not be trusted that easily. Either one or the other view has held primacy in Russian policy making, and over the years, apprehension has held the upper hand.

Apprehension has manifested itself for many reasons, historically, as well as due to lack of clarity of intention, especially with regard to suspicions of Chinese investment in Russia’s <<backyard>>.

The Valdai Club, a think tank established in Russia and frequently referred to by the Russian government, has most recently brought out a report which focuses on the <<Greater Eurasia>> aspect.\(^{19}\) While they acknowledge the crucial role China has played for Russian interests since the Ukraine crisis, they also express their apprehension with regard to the main driver for EEU China cooperation - the alignment of the EEU with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). They express their concern with regard to the weakness of the foundation of this institutional alignment with Beijing, and the low level of trade between other EEU countries and China. Additionally, the BRI has two routes to Russia, one travelling through Mongolia, and one through the heavily dependent region of Central Asia.\(^{20}\) China has been focusing its large scale investment plans in the Central Asian route, which might serve as an irritant to Russia, considering its political dominance in the region. China has additionally been holding back on some investment projects in Russia, due to its focus on Sub Saharan Africa and East Asia.\(^{21}\) It can thus be inferred that there is a certain amount of disappointment for Russia, as relations with China have not developed to the extent desired.

Furthermore, the thought arises, how will the partnership work in the face of a potential thaw in relations between Russia and the West? Will the average Russian continue to trust Chinese influence in their affairs? The partnership has often been described as <<pragmatic>>, meaning a practical, realistic and sensible progression considering the circumstances. Were there to be a change in the circumstances, it is highly likely that the traditional, untrusting stream of Russian thought will make a comeback, especially in consideration of Russia’s turbulent history with China. While the comprehensive engagement appears to cover all bases and appear solid at face value, the fundamentals of the relationship remain fragile and highly susceptible to change.

\(^{19}\)http://valdaiclub.com/files/11454/  
Valdai Club, Towards the Greater ocean 2, Russia’s Breakthrough to Asia, Valdai Discussion Club Report


While comparisons have often been drawn between Xi Jinping and Putin's styles of leadership, Chinese governance is radically different to Russia owing to the high level of institutionalization. Internationally, as well, the two countries have operated differently, with China abstaining from pursuing a policy of active interference. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, spoke to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in September 2018, about the comprehensive engagement with Russia. He insisted that the enhanced relations were an attempt at bringing normalcy to China's foreign relations with neighbours, and were largely economic in objective and nature. He emphasized the fact that the two countries are on the same page with regard to various international issues, including the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and terrorism. He concluded his remarks on relations with Russia by insisting on the fact that China is attempting to normalise and improve ties with not just Russia, but also the U.S, on all fronts. In comparison to the Russian perception, the Chinese perception of the comprehensive engagement with Russia has been largely economic in nature. While China's relations with the U.S have been exceedingly strained more recently, China will always be economically linked with the U.S. The increasing adversarial tensions between China and the U.S in an economic as well as a geopolitical context could potentially hold its ramifications on the Sino Russian partnership. While this creates incentive for Sino Russian cooperation, the fact remains that political priorities of the two countries are different. China is seeking to capitalize more

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on its economic plane in order to enhance its influence and improve political ties, while Putin has openly denounced the West and has interfered in geopolitical affairs. Militarily as well, Beijing has been largely dissatisfied by the continued Russian arms sales to rival countries, such as India and Vietnam\(^{23}\), which has further contributed to the mistrust between the two countries. All of these factors create a certain amount of apprehension on the Chinese front, limiting the ability to develop mutual trust in the relationship.

Additionally, the question arises, is the comprehensive engagement taking place between equals or unequals? While economically, China has held the upper hand, militarily, Russia is ahead. This could potentially contribute to the trust issues between the two countries, on an individual, societal and governmental level. This, combined with a divergence of political priorities, Western adversarial tensions faced by both Russia and China, an absence of trust, and underlying mutual suspicion could potentially jeopardize the strategic partnership.

**The Sino Russian Comprehensive Engagement - Where do India's concerns lie?**

India has long enjoyed close knit relations with Russia, which are heavily concentrated on defense trade. on the 21st of May 2018, Prime Minister Modi met with President Putin at an informal summit in Sochi, where the traditionally close relationship was upgraded to the status of a «special privileged strategic partnership>. Despite this, there have been multiple factors contributing to the uncertainty in Russo Indian relations. Given the current geopolitical scenario, Russia has been diversifying its relations, increasing ties with rival nations to India such as China and Pakistan. This brings a large amount of risk to the relations that the two nations- India and China- have long enjoyed, much to the concern of New Delhi. 60 percent of India's imported military equipment comes from Russia, and India has long benefited from a privileged military technological cooperation, which dates back to the Soviet era. On the other hand, Russia's increased military cooperation with China, coupled with Russian suspicion of India's growing ties with the U.S has to a certain extent had some effect on India-Russia relations. The fact that India's relations with Russia are massively concentrated on defense trade will be a main area of concern, as increased Sino Russian military ties could potentially prejudice India's defence in South Asia. Russia has tried to

reassure India that military cooperation between New Delhi and Moscow will not be affected, with Russia's defense minister Sergei Shoigu having made a statement in December 2018 stating "no other state cooperates with India in the sphere of the transfer of armament and military hardware production technologies as close as Russia". However, diplomatic efforts are being made by India to increase dialogue with Russian counterparts in order to ensure that India's defence is not jeopardised in the face of these developments, with Russia being reminded of the adversarial repercussions of increased military exchange with China.

Increased ties between Pakistan with both Russia and China have placed significant constraints in India’s relations with the two countries. This has resulted in Pakistan being the country most supplied with Chinese arms out of all the nations importing Chinese arms. Exchange of nuclear technology including tracking systems for nuclear warheads took place between China and Pakistan as a result of India's tests of the Agni V Ballistic missile system in 2012.

### Chinese Arms Exports to Asia, 2008-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Export Value (in Millions)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>$6,074 million</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>$2,106 million</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>$1,275 million</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>$1,987 million</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>$1,136 million</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Asia</td>
<td>$1,360 million</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SIPRI

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24“Russia, India Reach 'Unprecedented' Level in Military Technology Transfer.” TASS, tass.com/defense/1035826.


Reports have indicated that China is now in the process of building advanced naval ships for Pakistan, equipped with modern nuclear defense systems and will prove an excellent contender in the Indian ocean. While the increased military ties between China and Pakistan does not come as much of a surprise considering the geopolitical dynamic in the region, those between Russia and Pakistan are of enormous concern to India. Recently, it was reported that Russia has allegedly decided to loosen its longstanding restrictive arms supply policy to Pakistan and has been in talks to exchange sophisticated air defense systems, battleships and tanks. The potential sale of arms by Russia to Pakistan will not only affect its relations with long term strategic partner India and could also affect the course of the arms race between India and Pakistan. This move is yet to be confirmed, and Russia has indicated that it will not take any steps which will undermine India’s interest. However, its importance in the list of India’s concerns cannot be underestimated.

Another area of huge concern to India is the potential effects of prolonged Chinese influence on Russian strategy and policy. The heavier the pressure felt by Russia from the West, the more reliant it is likely to be on Chinese support, on all fronts. This poses as a significant security threat for India,


once again potentially prejudicing New Delhi’s position in South Asia. While Russia and India have largely shared similar worldviews, there has been a divergence on the question of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additionally, Russia and China have seemed to work in tandem in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for years. The two countries have taken similar stances on a number of global issues, spanning from support for Assad’s Syria and voting against resolutions for action in Venezuela, to developments with regard to North Korea. More recently, Russia has been a lot less active in extending its unfailing/unambiguous support to India’s concerns in the forum. The most pertinent example would be that of the Masood Azhar issue, where Russia expressed a cautious amount of support for India’s requests to list and ban him as an international terrorist. While Russia did not oppose Western initiatives in support of the issue in the UNSC, it did not express its unwavering support to the cause as a result of China’s outright opposition to the motion. Similarly, Russia has failed to express its unequivocal support towards India’s objectives in gaining membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), as well as attaining a permanent member seat in the UNSC. Russia’s unsteady/faltering support towards India’s global concerns compromises crucial aspects of the Indo Russian relationship on the international front. It has been speculated that Chinese influence on Russia and the prioritization of Chinese interests has resulted in the undermining of India’s interests.

An area where both Russia and China are looking to cooperate with India is on multilateral platforms. As of June 2018, both India and Pakistan attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
summit for the first time as full members. The SCO is crucial to India for many reasons: to gain more access to the Eurasian region, express security concerns, and to ensure that India has a place at the table in order to discuss regional issues on the same platform as both Russia and China. India will look to capitalize on the opportunity provided in order to benefit from this regional grouping, and perhaps even look to resolve issues with rival states. The Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping is another tool that India can utilise in order to conduct dialogue and voice concerns with both Russia and China. The first RIC trilateral in 12 years was held on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Buenos Aires in November 2018, at a pivotal time in geopolitical relations. The newly resuscitated forum demonstrated a fair amount of success at the G20 summit held in Osaka in June 2019. China sought both India and Russia’s support in the face of trade complications with the US, and on WTO reforms. The three countries have a few areas of convergence to discuss at this platform, and India views the RIC dialogue as a means to exert a positive influence on bilateral ties with both Russia and China.

One of the most recent updates in the Russo-Indian relationship is the formalization of plans between Putin and Modi for the creation of the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor on the 2nd of September 2019. Connectivity between these two ports will not only give impetus for the cooperation between India and Russia’s Far-East, but will also increase India’s naval presence in the Indo Pacific. The benefits for India are not only economic, but this maritime corridor holds certain strategic implications as well, vis. A vis. India’s increased naval presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, potentially countering China’s ‘string of pearls strategy’. This will also enable Russia to invite potential Indian investments in the Russian Far-East, balancing the increasingly concerning Chinese presence in the region.

Additionally, India should look to work on mending unrepairs border issues, as well as suspicion surrounding the BRI with China. By creating more flashpoints with China on a diplomatic level, the improvement of relations is hindered, and tensions are increased. This is detrimental to India’s ability to uphold their interests on international platforms. Furthermore, it is important for India to ensure continued dialogue with their Chinese and Russian counterparts, in order to minimize the potential risks.

The Sino Russian comprehensive engagement is proving to be a very real phenomenon, leaving India with a number of concerns. By making use of multilateral platforms, as well as by engaging in

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continued dialogue with both countries on the diplomatic front, India can ensure that its relationship with either of these countries nor its position in South Asia is seriously affected.

Conclusion

Analyzing the above, it may seem apparent that a comprehensive engagement between Russia and China seems like a natural and pragmatic step in furthering the relations between the countries. A multitude of interests have aligned for the two nations, stemming from similar yet dissimilar causes. Economically speaking, common interests in natural resources and the Arctic have created incentive for a multitude of projects, including investing in joint ventures linking the BRI and the EEAU. Russian state-owned energy firms have struck major deals with China, as the two countries continue to attempt to forge stronger Eurasian economic ties. These attempts have not been without challenges. Chinese direct investment in Russia has rapidly fallen in the latter half of 2018, bringing in speculation of whether the Chinese are attempting to aid U.S sanctions against Moscow. Additionally, the scale of cooperation is yet to yield particularly impressive results, with complications in investment and trade hindering the process.

On the military front, Russia and China have found plenty of purpose to increase cooperation. Vostok 2018 was an impressive yet highly symbolic demonstration of the combined capacity of the two militaries. While increased military cooperation could prove highly useful in the defense of common geopolitical threats, the likelihood of this occurring is low. It is highly unlikely that either country is likely or willing to compromise on preexisting military commitments. Concerns with regard to military cooperation between the two countries in the Pacific are valid, nonetheless, as their combined capacities both on sea and in air can pose as a real threat.

Leaders of both countries have demonstrated a united front in various multilateral institutions, strongly supporting the very concept of multilateralism. Both presidents Xi and Putin have taken similar approaches towards various multilateral platforms, utilizing them to further their best interests. They have both expressed an opposition to protectionism and unilateralism, in order to benefit from economic globalism. Their curiously close friendship has been met with much suspicion by global media, the value of which is often debated. Diplomatically speaking, the two countries

have been consistently keeping up appearances, especially in the face of Trumps hostile comments pre G20.

It must be kept in mind however, that the very foundation of the relationship is not strong enough or particularly conducive to a sustained comprehensive partnership. In addition to the challenges faced in economic cooperation, the history of these two countries is largely volatile. Complete trust between both governments and civil societies is impossible to ascertain. Furthermore, the current global political climate is highly susceptible to change, and the predominant characteristic of the Sino Russian partnership is pragmatism, nothing further. Mutual suspicion and constant turbulence in their respective relations with the West will continue to cast a shadow over the partnership, affecting many spheres of the engagement.

India has many valid concerns in relation to this comprehensive engagement, the biggest of which being potentially compromised cooperation with Russia and the prolonged effects of Chinese influence on Russian policies. The area that India needs to work on is ensuring that the primary element of relations with Russia, defense trade, is not compromised. Lastly, India should look to capitalize on its position with Russia and China on various multilateral forums by finding common ground, extending support and reiterating its interests.

The warming trend in Sino Russian relations was initially dispelled as a myth and was branded as a short-lived phenomenon. Strategic convergence, political pressures and pragmatism has brought the relations to unprecedented levels. However, faulty foundations, mutual mistrust and underdeveloped economic relations indicate that the comprehensive engagement between the two countries is not highly sustainable. Without a doubt, the very basis of the relations is rooted in shared grievances and not in common goals. The fact of the matter remains that the priorities of the two countries remain fundamentally different. How long can two great powers continue to cooperate while simultaneously furthering both mutual and individual interests? Only time will tell.

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