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Issue Brief

Russia's New Game Plan

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Summary

On September 9, geopolitics unexpectedly hit the news headlines when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov made an important statement about the ongoing talks between Moscow and Islamabad on the delivery of Russian multirole Mi-35M attack helicopters and the latest Su-35 fighter jets. Ryabkov said Pakistan is Russia's “closest partner” and the ties between the two countries are evolving beyond the military sphere to include other sectors such as energy. Within days of Ryabkov's statement, a prominent Russian political analyst Andrew Korybko detailed why Pakistan is gaining pivotal importance in the Russian geo-strategic calculus. This article appeared on the website of a Russian government funded think-tank. As a keen watcher of Eurasian affairs, I thought it is important to share the significant points articulated by Andrew Korybko in his rather astounding article so that the Indian strategic community can understand the new thinking among informed Russian circles.

On September 9, geopolitics unexpectedly hit the news headlines when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov made an important statement about the ongoing talks between Moscow and Islamabad on the delivery of Russian multirole Mi-35M attack helicopters and the latest Su-35 fighter jets. Ryabkov said Pakistan is Russia's "closest partner" and the ties between the two countries are evolving beyond the military sphere to include other sectors such as energy. At the same time, he also suggested that this will not have a negative impact on relations between Moscow and New Delhi.

Coming from a top Russian official, these statements cannot be considered as a mere kite flying stunt by the Russian media. Such a tectonic strategic shift may not have come as a pleasant news to Indian ears, but before we react to this startling change in the Russian position, it is important to first understand the deeper and nuanced aspects of Russia's motives.

Interestingly, within days of Ryabkov's statement, a prominent Russian political analyst Andrew Korybko provocatively detailed why Pakistan is gaining pivotal importance in the Russian geo-strategic calculus. The article, titled "Pakistan is the "Zipper" of Pan-Eurasian Integration", appeared on 15 September on the website of the Russian government funded think-tank – Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) established by the President of the Russian Federation. The RISS puts up policy papers to the President's office, the Federation Council, the State Duma and the Security Council as well as to Government offices, ministries and departments. (The RISS has closely interacted with IDSA in the past and the two institutions have signed a MoU for joint research. However, the Russian think-tank has not shown much interest for cooperation with IDSA in the past few years).

As a keen watcher of Eurasian affairs, I thought it is important to share the significant points articulated by Andrew Korybko in his rather astounding article so that the Indian strategic community can understand the new thinking among informed Russian circles.

In Part I of his article, Korybko deals with the 'zipper' concept of how Pakistan can draw together four of Eurasia's most prominent economic entities, and examines the key imperatives for Russia to build a strong Strategic Partnership with Pakistan. In Part II, he does crystal gazing on the most probable ways in which the US can attempt to offset everything or derail Pakistan's future destiny of joining the Eurasian integration process.

Korbyko's article begins by saying that contrary to popular myth about Pakistan as a "backward land of terrorism and poverty" that carries little actual weight, the West purposefully neglects the country's rising geopolitical importance in Eurasia and its potential to connect the massive economies of the Eurasian Union, Iran, SAARC, and China to create an integrated pan-Eurasian economic zone.

The article then elaborates why Russia recognises Pakistan's prime geopolitical potential and how it is manoeuvring to speed up the development of full-spectrum relations with this "South Asian gatekeeper." It says that Russia's overarching goal is to provide a "non-provocative balancing component to bolster Pakistan's regional political position and assist with its peaceful integration into the multi-polar Eurasian framework being constructed by the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership."

Interestingly, it draws attention to China's grand vision of building a trans-Pakistani trade corridor under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which could be a catalyst for connecting the four economic blocs together. This includes linking of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with SAARC intersecting at the Xinjiang-Pakistan junction to be developed under the CPEC.

From the Russian perspective, the article suggests, the CPEC not only represents a "geopolitical pivot for China, but also a geo-economic one", for "it'll position the country within easy access to the Mideast oil fields". This is the only way China will be able to quell the "externally orchestrated destabilization that it's lately found itself experiencing in Xinjiang."

It stresses the importance of the Iran-Pakistan-China pipeline project (a part of the CPEC) becoming a reality and suggests that "should Xinjiang succeed in becoming a significant Eurasian trading hub in connecting China, Eurasian Union, SAARC, and Iran, then it would catapult in geo-economic significance to become an ultra-strategic Heartland region."

On the prospect of India joining the Eurasian system, Korybko's article says that the touchy issue of India's claim over "Pakistan-administered Kashmir" could come in the way. However, "if Indian companies employ this route, the economic allure might be too tempting to resist." Further, if Indo-Pak differences could be relaxed (perhaps within the SCO framework), then "the organization would finally be able to cash in on its economic capability and fully integrate with itself and the rest of Eurasia."

Importantly, the article discloses how Russia's strategic ties with Pakistan are moving towards very "exciting future possibilities" despite Russia being "India's closest friend". It notes that the emerging trend might appear somewhat "perplexing" but it isn't all that "unexpected." Because, the end of the Cold War and the subsequent emergence of South Asian "nuclear bipolarity" have reduced the intensity of Indo-Russian strategic ties as well as America's dealings with Pakistan. These shifts in focus (India's westward and Pakistan's eastward) do not, however, suggest that either India or Pakistan has completely deserted its erstwhile partner; only that they are seeking adjustments to protect their national interest in the changed context. But at the same time, these shifts in focus have not yet altered the Indo-Pak standoff. In this context, the article notes, both India and Pakistan seem to be willing to give multilateralism under Eurasia a chance, as evident from their entry into the SCO.

More interestingly, the author points to the Kremlin's calculation of its ability to intermedicate between Beijing and New Delhi in the event of a major India-China crisis. But he also says that Russia does not enjoy the same leverage to do so in an India-Pakistan conflict situation. As a result, in the latter situation, Moscow would prefer to "push the US into the mix – giving it plenty of opportunity to divide and conquer according to the present geopolitical circumstances." Korybko then goes to point out that "if Russia were to compensate for its diplomatic 'blind spot' with Pakistan and reinvigorate the bilateral relationship with Islamabad, then it could mirror the role that it plays between India and China in also helping to balance the tension between India and Pakistan." This strategy, the article argues, would eventually "push the US out of the playing field, though India will still retain its

current level of ties with the US but not for the purpose counterbalancing Pakistan." It suggests that both India and Pakistan would then rather rely on their same "trusted partner Russia", which for its part will be able to mediate between the two (like it does with India and China).

The article admits to the trust deficit between India and Pakistan as the weakest link in the 'zipper' vision, though the vision could still succeed without the SAARC component because the "EEU would gain by India's physical incorporation into the unified Eurasian infrastructural framework." Korybko also points to Russian diplomatic and strategic competence being capable of minimizing Indo-Pak discord and exploring the economic benefit of their peaceful collaboration.

The Russian analyst then explains how Russia made the first strategic move in this regard in June 2014 by offering to sell attack helicopters to Pakistan for the latter's drug-combating efforts. Though the "paradigm shift" was attributed by many to Russia's concerns over post-2014 NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the main idea was to initiate the process of depolarisation in India-Pakistan tensions and to make the multi-polar concept more cohesive as a result. The article says that Russia's next move would be to help Pakistan with technical expertise for building a portion of the Iran-Pakistan-China gas pipeline in the near future.

According to the write up, Pakistan's own excitement has increased after sensing the enormous economic opportunities that will unfold after CPEC completion. Pakistanis could see the "writing on the wall" and even contemplate sealing a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Union. This signifies how seriously Russia takes its evolving partnership with Pakistan. The article underlines how the relationship is also gaining a soft power touch, with both sides preparing for their first-ever cultural exchange year. In a symbolic significance of what is likely to come, the article says that "Pakistan's national military band performed at the Moscow International Music Festival."

The article notes that "there should thus be no doubt at this point about the commitment of both sides for deepening the relationship as the ongoing interactions between the two are beyond passing convergence of business interests." It further says that "Both sides understand the larger significance of what they're doing", which is to work for the "shared vision of an integrated and multi-polar Eurasia."

However, on the down side and for the Eurasian enterprise to succeed, the author anticipates that CPEC and the 'zipper' plan could face a major blow either due to instability within Pakistan or India's possible refusal to participate in it.

Interestingly, the article notes that any possibility of all-round Russia-Pakistan engagement could speed up Indo-US proximity which, in turn, will lead to provocation by the "US and its information proxies". Things could also be exacerbated by an exaggerated "Indian threat assessment of Russia's activities." Any Indian paranoia over Russia's 'sliding away' to join the China-Pakistan 'axis' would consequently negate the main reasons behind the Russian-Pakistan strategic partnership, which is to "place Moscow in a position to intermediate between New Delhi and Islamabad and keep regional relations stable enough so as to jump start the envisioned multilateral economic partnership."

The author, however, argues that Russia's Pakistan gambit might fail most likely because of the United States playing dirty. In such a scenario, Russia would be worse off and risk losing a major strategic partner in India. Pakistan, on the other hand, will "never see its relation with Russia as equal level to one it has with China."

The article cautions that Russia needs to proceed delicately taking into consideration how the Indian establishment views Russia's evolving ties with Pakistan. It does not discount the ability of the US to split Russia and India through Pakistan, like it did with Russia and the European Union through Ukraine (although for different reasons).

The author fears the possibility of the US creating a rift through "information warfare" especially when Indo-US defence ties are deepening. He notes that this could have in a way "possibly played a part in influencing Moscow's decision to resume arms exports to Pakistan." The article draws attention to the saliency of "underreported military development" that makes the US more integral to India's national security, and this it says coincides with New Delhi's strategic overlap with the US in containing China. "The longer this progresses, the further the US will embed itself into India's deep state apparatus, with all of the unfortunate foreign policy consequences for the multi-polar world" the article notes.

The writer then dwells on the personal rapport shared between Modi and Obama and other aspects of the Indo-US friendship which, he thinks, could be an "exaggerated charade for political purposes, there's nothing tangible to indicate that this is the case" and by itself doesn't pose any worries for Russia." But what really worries Russia is the possibility of Obama leveraging his friendship with Modi to "enact certain policy shifts", such as "his encouragement to India's Act East policy for unstated reason that can aggravate relations with China." According to Korybko, Russian interests would be most endangered by the "US winning over India into viewing the Russian-Pakistan strategic partnership as a threat" and suggests that Putin should "continually reinforce his relationship with Modi so that the latter is unsusceptible to being tricked by Obama into doubting the Russian President's intentions." (It is pertinent to note here that in his congratulatory message to Prime Minister Modi on his 65th birthday, issued by the Kremlin on September 17, President Putin praised how the Prime Minister rightly enjoys high international authority both in his homeland and abroad as a proficient politician and statesman. The message says "we highly appreciate your efforts to strengthen the special and privileged strategic partnership between our countries, develop Russian-Indian interaction in solving topical issues of the regional and global agenda.")

Further, the article points to the likelihood of American involvement in creating instability in Baluchistan. Baluch separatism driven by American interests is not just for destabilising Gwadar (the source of CPEC) or for the political fragmentation of Pakistan but to create a new geopolitical space to be carved out of the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan as well. Such a Baluch proxy, it says, could provide the US with a greater degree of influence over both Iran and India in controlling trans-regional transport connectivity. Of course, the author cites the Pentagon's foremost author Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Peters' infamous map Blood

Borders: How a Better Middle East Would Look, which specifically earmarks a "Free Baluchistan" carved out of Iranian and Pakistani territory.

Korybko then moves beyond the Baluch separatist scenario to highlight the presence of militant Islamic radicalism in FATA – the most important destabilising factor in Pakistan. To add to that he draws attention to the rise of ISIL and its "expansive neo-Caliphate ideology" in Afghanistan's three provinces of Farah (west), Helmand (south), and Nangarhar (east). The ISIL, he says, could use Nangarhar province as a staging ground for pushing deeper into Pakistan by eliminating the Durand Line and "annex" the 'state of Hind' (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar). Further, Korybko also says that if more "Taliban fighters defect to the up-and-coming group" a scenario of a birth of a "transnational 'mini-Caliphate' between Nangarhar and parts of FATA would evoke the shades of ISIL's prior successes along the Syrian-Iraqi border." Not just that, the article vividly points to how ISIL is also moving in the northern direction, citing the defection in May of Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the head of Tajikistan's Internal Special Forces, to ISIL. It hints at the possibility of ISIL gaining invaluable intelligence and employing Khalimov's knowledge in infiltrating into the most 'ideal' location in Gorno-Badakhstan region. If this occurs concurrently, the article suggests, the "US then would be keen, among other things, to take revenge for Kyrgyzstan denouncing its cooperation agreement with the US." Therefore, the article does not rule out the possibility of a quadrilateral South-Central Asian Caliphate emerging in "heavily fortified Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges, with Pakistan being the southern peg of this vile construction."

The article paints another disruptive scenario of how the US could derail Pakistan's geo-economic destiny by engineering a possible "Colour Revolution against Prime Minister Sharif or any of his successors", although it also says that the violent protests last year did not pan out as a doom and gloom scenario for Pakistan. Korybko does not foretell the exact contours of the follow-up disruptive attempt, but says that with the "improved political technology available" it might likely embrace "anti-corruption" slogans led by an amorphous and superficially apolitical "civil society" in Pakistan. Such a structural innovation, the article suggests, would "allow the coup's leaders to readjust their social infrastructure (leadership, members, slogans, etc.) on the fly a lot more efficiently than if they followed the comparatively rigid practices of their predecessors in organizing the event around clearly defined political parties led by a few well-known (and easily compromised) individuals."

This scenario to be deployed in Pakistan would be "Colour Revolution 1.5". The article notes that this will be halfway between the comparatively 'docile' 2003 Colour Revolution 1.0 in Georgia and the "out-of-control Hybrid War mayhem of Colour Revolution 2.0 in EuroMaidan." Colour Revolution 1.5 in Pakistan could go either way, "towards 1.0 if it sputters out like in Armenia or towards 2.0 if it dangerously intensifies like it did in Syria." The article says that 1.5 could become a dangerous innovation to "regime change strategy" and that the US would be committed to apply it first with smaller targets before being "perfected and repackaged to Pakistan."

The article argues that Moscow has rightly taken the “bold step in reaching out to Islamabad and soliciting a strategic partnership” and the quick pace of the partnership taking a revolutionary shape is a “natural fit for both partners.” But this trend, according to the article, has incited the US’ “geopolitical jealousy”, which is keen to call upon a “mixed bag of secessionist, terrorist, and Colour Revolution destabilizations to offset Pakistan’s catalytic role in bringing Eurasia together.” The author then calls upon Russia, China, and Iran to defeat the threat so that Pakistan can become Eurasia’s economic ‘zipper’ and linking these (and perhaps even SAARC’s) economies together in an emboldened multi-polar future.

The article concludes by saying that the EU is mistakenly staying out (due to US pressure) of this trans-Eurasian integration process, which is becoming the primary theme of the 21st century. But “the rest of the main continental economic powers – the Eurasian Union, Iran, SAARC, and China – stand poised for closer integration with one another owing to the infrastructural overlap that Pakistan’s geostrategic location provides.”

The central theme of Korbyko’s article is to highlight the pivotal importance of Pakistan and the Russian eagerness to build a foundation of political trust with the Pakistani leadership so as to better assist in the management of Pakistani-Indian tensions.

To be sure, Pakistan can certainly help Russia shift its focus away from its current difficulties but Moscow should be doubly careful whether Pakistan will not become a staging ground to break up Russia further. The Americans have already tested the Pakistani betrayal, and China too sooner or later will become another victim of Pakistani treachery.

Surely, the Russians have always displayed enthusiasm for mediation between India and Pakistan, but Moscow would do well to remind itself of its failure to achieve success in the mid-1960s. I will leave the interpretation and analysis of this important article to the readers.

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