



RUSSIA COUNTER BALANCING CHINA'S 'BIG BROTHER' RISE



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06 October 2017

A great shift has been witnessed in Russia-China strategic relations since 2014. The diplomatic and economic isolation of Russia (post annexation of Crimea by Russia) by Western allies has led Russia to strengthen its relations with China as it is a fast emerging economic power and has a huge market potential. The Russia (military capabilities) and China (economic strength) strategic partnership shares mutual interests and concerns, including the challenge to the US influence in global politics.

Some of the key developments in the partnership since 2014 have been the announcement of the \$400 billion gas pipeline deal with ready cash to start building pipelines. Russia seems to have compromised with its reluctance to sell advanced weapons technology to China as seen with the sale of 24 Su-35 fighter aircraft and S-400 air defence missiles. Russia's partnership with China is a 'rebound' to mainly resolve its economic crisis. The merger of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiatives is a case in point. The most crucial strategic development in the partnership is the growing trilateral engagement between Russia, Pakistan and China. Within a short span of time, Russia and China appear to have achieved some of their mutual geopolitical aims, especially in keeping the US influence at bay in areas such as the Central Asian region- an area which for Russia and China is their 'common sphere of interests'.

But, is it right to conclude that all is well in the relations, especially with the 'role reversal' debate surrounding the strategic partnership in which Russia sooner or later will be a 'junior' partner, with China rising as the 'big brother'? Russia is well aware of China's potential to over-ride the influence of Russia both as a regional and international player. Keeping the post-Soviet collapse era in mind-where the US disregarded Russia's gestures for an equal partnership- Russia will ensure not to repeat such a scenario in its strategic partnership with China. Henceforth, Russia has its own counter

1 | www.capsindia.org

balance measures to check China's rise as 'big brother' in the bilateral partnership. Some of these are argued below:

The most evident geopolitical success of Russia-China relations has been confined to the CAR, mainly through the SCO. Aware that the SCO is a China-centric organisation, Russia's enthusiastic support to India's permanent membership in the organisation is to balance/minimise China-Pakistan proximity in the SCO. Though Russia gave its consent to merge EEU and OBOR initiatives, it is also clear as regards positions on some of China-backed interests such as the CPEC project. Russia's reluctance to join the CPEC is a conscious effort not to antagonise India due to the latter's reservations on the issue (as the CPEC traverses through Pakistan occupied Kashmir). This action by Russia can be viewed as deviating from promoting Chinese interests.

Russia sees India as a potent counter-balancer to China's growing rise, something that remains in conflict with Russia's national and strategic interests. Apart from cajoling India into the SCO, the Far East is another region in which Russia wants India to play a key role. India plans to make significant inroads in the region through high investments and active participation in development projects. India has been comfortable in participating in projects that are Russia initiated, given the confidence and trust that exists in the partnership.

India is strengthening its foothold in the Asia-Pacific region through strategic partnership with the US and Japan. The economic engagement with Russia in the region will further enhance its geo-economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region, and the Far East would be the key for promoting India's interests. In this context, Russia has been touted to make the right move to check China's rise in the region by bringing players such as India into the fold. The 'yellow threat' or 'sinification' would be a time bomb if Russia loses its leverage in the Far East in coming years. Thus, India's active participation in the Far East is Russia's move to counter China's looming presence in the region.

Another area of clash of interests between the two countries is in defence, not as partners but as competitors in the global arms market. Russia has diversified its defence cooperation with Asian countries such as Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. The fact that Russia is arming some of these South/Southeast Asian countries is a sign of its insensitivity towards weakening China's foreign policy interests in the region. Although Russia and China enjoy good defence relations; China has made great strides in the indigenisation process of its own Defence Industrial Complex. Consequently, the two countries, de facto, are competitors in the global arms market. For instance, Myanmar seeks to minimise its dependence on defence cooperation with China by bringing in players such as Russia.

However, Russia's past strained relations with Pakistan and its strategic partnership with India will restrain Russia from increasing its defence sales to Pakistan; hence, China would continue to enjoy the primary defence supplier nation status with Pakistan. Russia today has revamped its defence capabilities, especially in electronic warfare that is claimed to be far superior to the West. China, on the other hand, is far behind both in electronic warfare capabilities and advanced weapons technology and heavily relies on Russia. Despite Russia compromising its stand with the sale of limited advanced weapons technology to China, Russia's high end defence capability, including electronic warfare, is the antidote to counter China in case of a military confrontation.

Lately, the factor to bring Pakistan into the fold is mainly to favour Russia-China's grand strategy in and around Central Asia and Afghanistan as Pakistan's geographic proximity is too important to be ignored. Russia has not forgotten that Pakistan played a key role in executing Washington administration's Cold War interests to contain Soviet Russia's rise in the Asian region. An article in Japan Times¹ has stated that the post-Cold War movement led by the US has been derailed by the current trend in Russia-China relations. But the reality is that the diminishing role of the US in some of its key strategic partnerships is a result of its conscious decision such as in the case of Pakistan and the US draw down from Afghanistan. Pakistan's failure to respond to exporting terrorist activities and the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad is a case in point.

On the contrary, though Russia-China's mutual interests and concerns are to challenge the US' hostile policies towards these countries, at the individual level, both Russia and China continue to call for cooperation and collaboration with the US. Russia realises that given the enormity of economic cooperation between China and the US, military confrontation would be the least favoured option of China to counter the US influence. China will insulate its self interests rather than promoting Russia's foreign policy interests to challenge the US' containment policy. Hence, Russia's growing importance to military diplomacy and capabilities is to challenge NATO's containment policy of Russia in former Soviet space (Note: except for CAR, China is unconcerned about US' policy in rest of former Soviet space, especially in Eastern Europe).

Based on the above mentioned arguments, it can be stated that Russia is indeed concerned about China emerging as the 'big brother' in the partnership. Russia is also aware that despite China sharing mutual interests and common concerns, China's extension of support to Russia is limited to economic engagements and exercising of Veto power as a tool for diplomatic signalling to counter the US and its allies. Despite the asymmetries in the partnership, Russia cannot completely escape from Chinese clutches mainly due to its frail economic growth. Russia's high dependence on Chinese investment and

economic aid will restrain Russia from re-claiming the 'big brother' status in the partnership. The real key to counter China's rise is Russia reducing its own economic dependence on China. As of now, the strategic partnership between Russia and China is one which addresses each other's inadequacies to move ahead in international relations. Hence, Russia needs to strengthen its economic growth. As permanent interests drive a country's foreign policy behaviour, competition and clash of interests are bound to eclipse the strategic partnership between China and Russia in coming years.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: Russia's 'pivot to Asia', Role reversal, Russia-China Strategic Partnership, Sinification

Notes

¹Hal Brands, "America's new world order is dead", *The Japan Times*, 29 September 2017.
<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/09/29/commentary/world-commentary/americas-new-world-order-dead/>
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