

Resurgent Russian Ingress in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

After the fall of soviet-empire, Afghanistan became the playground of international players, with covert and overt agenda towards the country. It has also become a breeding ground for militant organization. Russia, after her recent show of power in the Middle East has set her eye on its regional chessboard. For protecting its borders from incursion of extremism and the menace of drug trafficking which is gaining pace, Russia is entering Afghanistan again. This time she has found her "favorite" jihadis on their side, the Taliban. How the entrance of resurgent power in the existing world order will have an impact on the country already going through the tough tides of unfolding international arena, Pakistan. The paper delineates, how the geo-political scenario compelled Moscow to get into bargaining with its rivals and what are the impacts on Pakistan.

Key Words: Afghanistan, Russia, Pakistan, Implications, Taliban, Jihad.

Introduction

The country emerging from the ashes of its empire, not as a superpower but a serious challenger of a Uni-polar world dominated by United States, the fact cannot be negated, by going through the track record of international ventures and leaps taken by Russia in Georgia, Crimea and in Syria. Russia's footprints in Afghanistan dates to their Military intervention in 1979. To the dark side of it, that wound caused by the 'Great Game' led to the disintegration of Soviet Union. After a long haul, where the world saw only one super power leading and dictating the arena. Now, with the changing tides in International arena, Russia consider itself as a legitimate Balancer at South Asian Geo-political chessboard (Ramani 2017).§Russia has earned a slot again, reviving the country from the grasp of a Capitalist system, where the rules of the game were not challenged and the status-quo prevailed for decades.

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After a long reigned Russian empire, the reign of 70 years of an ideological force and a military superior during the Cold War era which lasted for four decades. The resurgent role of Russia into the mainstream of international politics shakes the balance, it clearly forecast that the country's role will not be irrelevance in the coming years. This also draw the international structure from being a bi-polar to Uni-polar and to Multi-polar world order, where the unipolarity is also challenged by regional sates. The 21st century have seen a major shift in the structure, it is now more of a decentralized world, where the developing economies and positioned at geo-strategic locations on the globe have risen above the status of being dominated.

Changing geo-politics: Russia at regional chessboard

From its reemergence to global stage in the Crimea, where it did not compromise on their national and strategic interests. Followed by Syria, supporting Assad's regime and crushing the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda recovering large swathes of areas and maintaining the stability of the regime is landmark endeavor in strategic thinking of Moscow's administration (Massaro 2016). In 2007, Putin at Munich spoke decisively about the global power structure change, that how the global scenario is coming out from a centralized order. Furthermore, he pointed at the descending of Uni-polar world order pointing at United States, and the decline of Europe. He also hinted that by 2020, his country would be the most dynamic, richest and one of the progressive actor in decades to come (Laqueur 2010).

A position paper which appeared in Russia Newsweek 2010, which was prepared by the country's Ministry of foreign affairs emphasized on the dynamism which Russia envisages. The crux of which involve the warming up ties 60 plus countries all over the world with utilizing all the diplomatic and trade channels. This doesn't stop here, as the strategic realities throughout the globe are changing with startling speed, where decisive shifts occur, consequently shaping the realm of international arena.

The escalating spillover effect of the Afghan crisis in the region has already attracted many stakeholders including neighboring countries and United States. A buffer state of the region, after U.S invasion, defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and a ruthless air and ground campaign by International Security Assistance Forces. Afghanistan's political landscape in transition of successful yet a failed government of Hamid Karzai have come to the dismal state of a unity government under Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The U.S withdrawal in 2014 came at a juncture where Taliban held most of the territory, now they have further expanded to around 36 provinces. Their resilience in not losing the grounds have sent shivers across the region. They pose a direct threat to neighboring countries and mainly to the foreign forces who still have boots on

the ground. These violent non-state actors have jolted the strategic stability and reverberating a trans-national threat of violence and terrorism.

In the aftermath, Russia's restructured strategic thinking find it mandatory to grab a chair in the regional quagmire caused by terrorism (Pannier 2015). Russia's genuine concern about the threat from Afghanistan that the country can turn into the training ground or launch pads for any future activities inside Russia. Evidently, in recent times, Russia have been confronted and been forced to deal with the diverse geographic and ethnic entities of extremism (Dmitri Trenin, Oleg Kulakov, Alexey Malashenko, 2004).

It is in the best interest of Moscow to have prevailing peace, stability and development in Afghanistan. Witnessing the progress go in upward direction, Russia intends to work with leaders in Kabul, initiate and maintain bilateral ties with regional countries where the interests converge and do not pose a potential threat to Russia's interest.

One of the major pull factor for Russia's concern in Afghanistan is to maintain stability in its backyard, the Central Asian countries. Amongst which the three of them; Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are allied into Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) with Russia. In addition to this, Russia is also seriously concerned to the influx of drug flow coming from Afghanistan and most of the times become a gateway to Europe.

Furthermore, Russia's security may also be affected by the security threat to the Central Asian states as the latter fear repercussions in form of refugee influx, rise of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism, drug trafficking, trans-border threats because of the evolving situation in Afghanistan security paradigm. Consequently, these countries can turn to Moscow for help and support. It is high time for Russia to proactively engage itself in the region and stop further deterioration of situation which have created a complex regional security. Not only the Central Asian countries are dependent on the Russia's gas reservoirs, the dependency, however, have been curtailed by the Western countries which are seriously investing and taking advantage of resource-rich countries, but it is in the best of their interest to look for an alternate for trade and more importantly the security.

The absence of a fortified border from Afghanistan to Russia makes it easy for terrorist and arm groups to enter Russian territory. As, closing-down the border between Kazakhstan and Russia in not possible. One, it is one of the longest borders of the world which is over 4,350 miles. Two, it will hamper the cordial political and economic relations of Russia and Kazakhstan. Three, it will ignite a security dilemma and endanger the cordial relation between Russia and CARs.

The renewed Russia's involvement in Afghanistan is by the exclusion of the country in the process of a peace talks or any initiative taken for Afghanistan after soviet withdrawal. Unfortunately, after the Soviet collapse, Russia has been

deliberately pushed out of the Afghanistan. Mostly, the Western countries and some of the regional players like Pakistan, India and Iran are involved in the peace-process on Afghan soil. It is highly likeable that Russia is now gathering different cards which it can use and occupy a legitimate position in any regional or global diplomacy which address the Afghan peace; security; reconciliation process and prospects (Sharifi 2017). The cards which Russia holds are filling the space left after withdrawal; gearing up with Afghan government; engagement with Taliban; to counter IS threat and their concern over regional security. Just like cold-war era, communist ideology countering the capitalist, where it could make important decisions and were considered by the world and United States in specific. Russian leaders want to enunciate their country's eminence position on global stage again, where it can have a say in the political realm of South Asia, especially Afghanistan (Clifton B.Parker 2015).

Russia's external behavior: Revived Foreign Policy

Russia's behavior towards the world in contemporary geo-politico-economic landscape is redefined and clear which is the soft ascendancy over its neighbors; equality towards the principles defined and charted by International law; challenging the status-quo of United states and European union type world order and finally viable and important membership in a multipolar world order (Trenin 2009).

One of the attractive and unifying features of Russia's external behavior towards the international system and the prevailing power structure is the restoration of *derzhavnost* (great power identity), this is Russia's internal and external unifying theme. This has made the Russian leaders backed by the whole nation resilient enough to remain strong and molded its policy to ascertain its global and regional interests.

Despite the loss of Soviet empire, Russia have tremendously revived its global position in which its economy was an impetus to strengthen its position. It refocused on technological advancement and defense modernization. It has equipped itself with invincible weapon in shape of hybrid-warfare causing a nightmare for United States. Russia blatantly challenged the super power status of United States; neutralized and pulled many of the countries in European Union; warmed up with Chinese counterpart. Their actions and adventures abroad were also supported by China. Drawing and portraying the evil picture of the western-backed dubious and biased policies across the world, Russia stood as a bulwark against and vetoed most of the decisions taken by western-sphere. The energy thirsty European Union seek new market in Russia. The rising super power China has backed Russia's adventurists design silently, and ended up in mega gas projects in history. Russia's financial resources soared up because of the abrupt hike in oil and gas prices. This allowed Moscow to engage itself in

foreign avenues and erect hindrances for the U.S policies in Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. In its resurged status, Russia also curtailed Europe dependency on America for energy, it alienated them by supplying abundant energy supplies (Riywkin 2008).

To get a succinct picture of Moscow's foreign policies, one need to follow the tussle between Traditionalist and Progressives inside Kremlin (Korybko 2017). The former does not advocate Russia's diversifying and growing amicable relationships, they want the country to stick to old allies such as India, Syria and Armenia to name few. The latter, however, including permanent military, intelligence and bureaucracies understands that their country need to revitalize Russia's geo-strategic role in 21st century and should strive to become a supreme balancer.

Enter Putin

Russia's realignment in its strategic policies towards Afghanistan can be gauged by the re-entry of Vladimir Putin in the presidency. Under the former president Medvedev, Russia had many options to re-engage in Afghanistan, but it was Putin who took a front seat to steer the country's policy and priorities. For him there were three options to deal with post 9/11 Afghanistan. One, to return to 1990's, where it supported Northern Alliance. Two, to continue some level of cooperation with Western forces in creating peace and stability inside Afghanistan and protecting zone around Central Asia. Three, to cooperate with Afghan president and Taliban (Bohn, 2014).

The post 9/11, troops withdrawal in 2014, multifaceted internal problems faced by National Unity Government including the failed attempt for negotiations on Afghan-led peace process and emergence of Islamic State in Afghanistan. In addition to it, the fading dominance of United States overall and in the region, have evidently pulled and provoked the policy makers in Russia to re-evaluate its priorities. Now that the Russian leaders opt for more constructive role in the existing Afghan conundrum. Due to which Russia is weighing its options favorable to its core interests; to counter or maintain the balance of power in the region, as Russia continue to be the regional balancer; to demonstrate and consolidate the global leadership role; position itself in a negotiating position with viable cards in hand to hedge its options whilst dealing with the United States and European countries in the areas of economic, political and security ambit.

Undoubtedly, Russia amidst the campaign over the War on Terror, have provided and given airspace and land transportation to foreign forces in Afghanistan. However, Russia's diplomatic maneuverability towards Afghanistan can be marked by the steadily grown cooperation with NATO, as now Russia isn't threatened by the collective security whose mission and aim

faded after the demise of Cold War; concerns over the West's actual interest in Afghanistan, which Russia blame U.S for its myopic policies; growing relation with Kabul government and now Taliban.

The Kremlin's appointment of Zamir Kabulov to Afghanistan and Pakistan signals a strategic rethink about how Moscow opted the third option and how it views the Afghanistan conundrum. Kabulov served as a low-ranked diplomat during Soviet days in 80's. His appointment as an envoy by Putin is significant for regional peace, as he played an important role in Russia's peaceful policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. As, Kathryn Stoner, a Stanford political scientists and senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli institute for International Studies opine that "*Russia wants influence, but not ownership, in Central Asia, and ultimately in Afghanistan* (Stoner 2015)."

The tools which Moscow acquire and have them at their disposal are mainly for its own security concerns and that of the whole region which directly and indirectly impact Russia's national security. Notwithstanding, it have been engaged in diplomacy with Kabul and with regional powers like Pakistan, China, India and Iran.

Moscow, just like in Syrian case, is looking for a regional solution to the Afghan crisis which, according to them, affects their own country's security. For Afghanistan, Moscow is jockeying up the regional alliances with the neighboring countries of Afghanistan to opt for "intra-Afghan reconciliation", an effort to stabilize the security situation the country. Russia seeks for the involvement of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan to direct their efforts in providing security, uplifting humanitarian cause and participate in economic domain.

The use of multilateral organizations has emerged as an important strategy to create external conditions conducive to Russian interests and to create a more stable and predictable international environment. Among these frameworks, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) stands out as particularly important. Its extended membership represents almost half the world's population and its leading members, Russia and China, are major economic, military and political powers.

The most visible example of converging Sino-Russian policies has been the founding of the SCO, which grew out of the 'Shanghai Five' dialogues on ensuring peaceful regional development.

The SCO's initial mandate was to promote regional security and to protect its members from non-state security threats—especially terrorist organizations, ranging from local groups to more globalized entities such as al-Qaeda. The creation of the SCO could also be considered proof of the old axiom of nature abhorring a vacuum, as security cooperation in the region had previously been weak and untethered. Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one prime example towards regional alignment. The exclusive effort includes the Russia held conference which it hosted the representatives from 10 of the

regional countries. Prior to this, the representatives from China, Russia and Pakistan also met which deliberated upon maximum ways which can bring peace and stability back in the country. And the conference in Moscow hosted the diplomats from Iran, India and Afghanistan. The tri-lateral meetings hosting by Russia known as Moscow talks echoes the strategic shift. These trilateral and multilateral efforts by Moscow were debunked and criticized by U.S. Whereas, Russia is also maligned to have hijacked the U.S led efforts to find a peaceful solution to bring peace in the war-torn country.

Rapprochement with Taliban: Gauging Denominators

Amidst the regional alignments and adjustments, Moscow have found its enemy number one, Taliban, in the same paradigm they are looking towards Afghanistan (Wahdatyar 2017). As they believe they and Taliban have found common denominators.* Firstly, fighting the Islamic State in Afghanistan as Moscow fears that IS making inroads and penetrating in the Muslim population, mainly Chechens, which form largest contingencies in the IS campaigns of Iraq and Syria. Secondly, against western boots, it is also argued that to deter U.S long-term military presence in Afghanistan, Russia has started deep collaboration with Taliban to deter U.S troops. *Lastly, In fight Russia views the Taliban as a more reliable partner than Ghani in the struggle against drug trafficking. It is noteworthy that the present Afghan government accrues more illegal revenues from heroin sales than the Taliban regime. Moscow accuses the claim of U.S top General Mc Chrystal when on matter of opiates, his response came as an aid to the Afghan peasants. Moscow view such attitude responsible for the rapid growth and trafficking of opium inside Russia and other region (report October 23, 2009.).

Moscow's re-entry in Afghanistan can be pointed by the contact with Taliban and multiple international peace conferences mainly on Afghanistan. Amidst the deteriorating security conditions, failed negotiations, lack of a clear and defined U.S strategy for the region, Russia have completely revamped its strategy. Like Middle East overall and Syria to be specific, Afghanistan is more like becoming a duplicate for another Russia-West rivalry over policy making in war ragged country (Kugiel 2017).

In recent times, dramatic shift has been observed in the equations between Russia and Taliban. During the Tripartite Conference held in Tajikistan on Dec 2016, it is believed that Taliban governor of Kunduz province Mullah Abdulsalam also participated (Zia 26 Feb, 2016). Before that a relative shift was also seen when the Taliban kidnapped a Russian pilot in the Logar, Central area province of Afghanistan. Following the event, Russian and Taliban delegates met in United Arab Emirates, which saw the release of the pilot after few months.

Such events ignited a lot of eye-brows in political realm of Afghanistan (Hamid, Shalizi. Josh, Smith. December 08, 2016).

The relation between Russia and Taliban dates to 2007, when in southern Afghanistan province the narcotics production soared up, this increased production started trafficking to Europe from Central Asia and Russia. The circles in Moscow were of the opinion that the links between the Taliban and their country was to combat the problem posed by narcotics.

Russia's genuine concerns regarding the stability of its backyard which it believes have come by only a high price is not disturbed or revised with destabilizing entities, be it in the form of some groups or biased and fragile policies. The footprint of Islamic State in the Syria and Iraq has posed a transnational destabilizing threat, due to which Russia is at guards before it penetrates yet another region at its doorstep (Stepanova 2015).

As Russia fears the radical Muslims from the Volga and Urals region where the numbers of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is growing, whereas the rise of Salafist in Belozerye, in the Mordovian republic. The increased and repeated occurring of radicalization mainly amongst the educated middle class and also women coming in numbers is worrisome.

Intriguingly, assessing the threat posed by Taliban towards Russia's domestic or external policies is negative, nor does the Taliban challenge Moscow's influence in Central Asia. However, Moscow can also cooperate with Taliban to fight against other radical and extremist groups operating in Tajikistan or northern Afghanistan claims Dimitry in *The Diplomat* (Frolovskiy 2016).

There are strong traces of evidences that Moscow is also aiding Taliban to rebrand themselves and providing them as a goodwill in subsidizing the infrastructure and yet other major and needed construction is Taliban held suburbs (Arif Rafique 2017.). Praising the tripartite hosted by Russia the spokesperson for the group expressed "It is joyous to see that the regional countries have also understood that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is a political and military force" he further added that "The proposal forwarded in the Moscow tripartite of delisting members of the Islamic Emirate is a positive step forward in bringing peace and security to Afghanistan" (JOSCELYN 2017).

Impact on Pakistan

The country mostly affected by the events in neighboring county is Pakistan, with influx of millions of refugees, the proliferation of extremism and insurgencies, exacerbating regional arms race are all because of international stakeholders in Afghanistan (Akhtar 2008).

The rapprochement of Russia with Taliban, Afghan government and their recent ingress in Afghanistan have multifaceted implications, particularly on Pakistan's security. A front-line country in War on terrorism, embroiled in the

fight against it since 2001. After being declared a non-Nato ally by the then Bush Administration, Pakistan rendered a large magnitude of sacrifices, in the form of economic and human losses. The tragic outcome in the whole fight against terrorism and taking others fight to its own backyard caused more human losses than that of economic. Pakistan, playing its crucial role due to its strategic location have had consequences first after the Soviet invasion and then U.S invasion of Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been sincere about the situation in Afghanistan and links its own security with the stability in Afghanistan. Operation Zarb e Azb and Rad ul Fasad are the known and proclaimed relentless efforts by Pakistan showing the seriousness of a country. Apart from defeating and rooting out terrorism, Pakistan played a significant role in multi-states role for Afghanistan and advocated Afghan-led process. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group, bringing important actors in the fold have had some progress, unfortunately couldn't last long and were sabotaged. Progressiveness of Pakistan did not halt, and it went on with the regional and international solution to the Afghanistan problem. It brought the stakeholders on the table, being a legitimate player and having involved many stakes than any other country, Pakistan pursues a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the long-lasting problem. According to claims, international community sees the country as the "nucleus" of the region. They believe the situation in Afghanistan is directly or indirectly linked with Pakistan's security concerns.

For Pakistan, Russia's entry into its backyard again after their coarse history is remarkable with fast moving Geo-political tectonic plates. As Islamabad believes that the shift is in tune with Pakistan's policy seeking all-inclusive dialogue with the Taliban, policy makers in the capital have strongly supported Russia's willingness in Afghanistan. Russia has countered U.S efforts to contain and isolate Pakistan in the region by supporting Islamabad viewpoint on accommodating Taliban on political ground and advocates their view on the stabilization of Afghanistan.

The term trio, troika or the isosceles coined in the recent days is fulfilled when completed by the neutral force in Afghanistan scenario and a dominating force worldwide, China. China also opines negotiation and advocates the diplomatic approach towards Afghanistan. The China-Pakistan economic corridor, a flagship of One Belt One Road gave economic linkage to the whole region, where China will try to safeguard its own interest. China not only concerned about the economic gains of the country but also attach regional stability and bondage amongst the country where the trade and economy flourish. In Murree talks, Beijing played an important ground-breaking role in bringing Taliban on the table. China holds a strong neutral card in Afghanistan case, it doesn't hold covet agenda in Afghanistan, neither supported any military options for the region.

Russia-China-Pakistan trilateral is not a delusion or hold some weak grounds but is due to the efforts of Russia to engage both Islamabad and Beijing. Similarly, Islamabad also utilizing its ever-lasting friendship with China found itself in the same corner with Beijing and Moscow in the changing global structure. It is pertinent to mention that the trio of countries have been resonating to the entire international community for a “flexible” approach to deal with Taliban, and consider is necessary to strengthen Taliban as a force against Islamic State.

Formation of this three-nation alliance will not only hamper the threat of terrorism and extremism in the region but will also counter American’s covert designs in the region (Polina Tikhonova 2016.). Pakistan will be a beneficiary from such a formation which already found many convergences on ground.

Contrastingly, Russia’s ingress and rapprochement with evils can be detrimental for Pakistan and Afghanistan as well. It is believed that with the entry of Russia, Syrian like situation will erupt where U.S and Russia’s interests would collide and end up in more bloodshed and proxies. Pakistan believes that Afghanistan crisis since British, followed by U.S involving other bordering stakeholders had only brought clouds of extremism and militancy which are still hovering on; these are breaking country’s socio-politico-cultural fabrics.

Russia’s reemergence in Afghanistan can prove its position in the multipolar world, which can be used as leverage in future dealings with U.S on many other existing issues. Plunging into a zero-sum game in Afghanistan will eventually be round two of dark cloud hovering on Afghanistan just like the 80’s. Russia’s rapprochement towards the Taliban may be a preparation ahead for Russia if incase the Kabul government falls, or else the Russian engagement complicates the already entwined situation in the vulnerable country. This as a result will turn Afghanistan into a battleground for proxy, and such kind of power games would only benefit the militants or those who are luring on to exploit the situation.

Transformation of the global Russia-U.S. rivalry into a proxy war in Afghanistan would have a negative impact on stabilization of the country. Proxy wars never ended in a positive outcome, countries using countries and battle ground, non-state actors result in debacle and a prolonged complex security situation. In such entanglement, the political endurance on domestic and international level fades. The trust deficit and actions disguised under variance in policies have only destabilized countries.

Conclusion

Russia’s overt and covert role in Afghanistan can bring back the long-awaited stability in the region, if it partners with the countries which converge and advocates the same strategy. The “Isosceles” consisting of Pakistan-China-Russia or the “Golden Circle” of Russia, China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran can

collectively work for the economic development of South Asia and Central Asia. The economic integration of the countries and the region is possible with the stability of Afghanistan. Contrastingly, its entry could create dissonance which would reopen festering wounds. Consequently, situation would end up in less stable Afghanistan and would spiral the existing conflict into a heated war amongst the nations.

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