

Russia's Global Strategic Rebalancing: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

Russia under Vladimir Putin's leadership has assumed a personalised character which has drastically transformed its domestic and defence policy as well as its global grand strategy. The main contour of the grand strategy is a strategic rebalancing in the places of its influence including its near abroad and its area of interest including Asia, Asia Pacific and the Middle East. Putin's leadership and psychological orientation have a fundamental role in the materialisation of this transformation and the study of this factor serves as a lens to explain Russia's resurgence and also provides a guide to Russia's future foreign policy. One of the significant aspects of the strategic rebalancing is Russia's increasing influence in South Asia and the projects of building transport and trade corridor. While China remains another significant powerful player with similar geostrategic and geoeconomic plans; states such as Pakistan foresee great challenges as well as opportunities which emerge as a result of the increasing influence of Russia and China in the region and the lingering dissonance in Pakistan's relations with the United States of America.

Key Words:

Russia, Balance of
Power, Putin,
Leadership, Strategic
Rebalancing, Pakistan

Introduction

Russia's evolving grand strategy in the post-9/11 era displays the revival of conflicts with Crimea and Ukraine, intervention in Syria, efforts to form alliances with eminent powers such as China and India, creation of transport and export corridors and reasserting its influence on the global economic and monetary institutions. In addition, to these, there has arisen a relative non-cooperation and confrontation with the United States of America (US) at the international fora, which appears as a visible shift from post-Cold War relations with the US. These patterns broadly may be regarded as efforts toward global strategic rebalancing. While the analyses of these trends in post-9/11 have significantly been influenced by a discourse suggesting the rise of a New Cold War; an analysis of the enduring regime led by Vladimir Putin and the discourse professing a Russian identity (Dugin, 2019) combined with a perception of the decline of US global hegemony are significant factors that explain the observable resurgence and strategic rebalance initiated by Russia. The other fundamental implication of these trends in Russia's grand strategy is the role of two other great powers in South Asia. In addition, the war in Afghanistan initiated by the US and China's geoeconomic strategy of One Border One Road and the creation of transit and trade corridor in South Asia is expected to materialise in China-Pakistan Export Corridor and is expected to tremendously increase China's regional influence.

Though having a long history of alliances and military support, Pakistan and US relations have seen a gradual dissonance since 9/11 and in case of the US's exit from Afghanistan, Pakistan will be compelled to rethink its foreign relations with other regional and great powers: Russia and China. While Pakistan has had a long-withstanding relationship with China; Russia under Vladimir Putin poses a great challenge for Pakistan – especially since Russia is a state that appears to be immensely influenced by Putin's style of leadership, which has not remained the fundamental area of analysis and research inquiry among Pakistan's analysts and policymakers. It is assumed in this study that the character, foreign policy as well as the grand strategy of rebalancing promoted by the current Russian state needs to be studied by exploring the personal leadership of Vladimir Putin.

To explain the role of ideas and leadership in the strategic rebalancing, this article examines the gradual rise of Vladimir Putin and the consolidation of a personalised regime complemented with the evolution of a specific discourse that professes a domestic policy and a regional as well as global strategy under his leadership. This study further defines and charts the theoretical bases and modalities of strategic rebalancing in a post-9/11 era as an alternative to the discourse on the New Cold War. It is also claimed and argued that the purpose of this discourse is to justify the existence of a politically consolidated and administratively stringent ruling elite at the domestic level complemented with advocacy

for a military expansionist approach and validation of these two strategies by vocalising the discourse based on Russian identity. Finally, this study will examine the strategic implications of Russia's strategy in South Asia and its compulsions on Pakistan.

Putin's Russia: Resurgence and Rebalancing

The early post-Cold War years were marked by euphoria and initial expectations that the European Union (EU) may evolve as a pole, which may not primarily pose itself as a rival to the US and EU's joint decision-making, single market and a single currency and the creation of joint military forces was expected to transform into a pluralistic core, governing a hub-spoke pattern over its periphery (Kupchan, 1998). Russia's strategic balancing appears directed to assume the position of the other 'pole' since the EU did not emerge as such a power. The contours of Russia's strategic rebalancing comprise a pivot to East strategy or creating greater Eurasia, which has its origins from Yeltsin's Eurasianism, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative reaching out to the states comprising Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), promoting Russia's Asian relations or Asian-ness, restoration of a balance of power in the international affair, asserting its influence the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (such as the resolution on Iraq with propositions of inspections and discussion to gain a bargaining position and developing ties with Iran, Iraq, North Korea) and engaging in conflict with Ukraine and Georgia. These strategies appear confrontational to the US and are components of the projection of Russian symbolic power. In addition, by developing strategic ties with China and by signing Delhi and Bishkek Declarations, Russia appeared to project a commitment to a democratic multipolar world order based on the supremacy of international law and a strengthened United Nations (UN).

However, Putin's regime has gradually reconstructed the concept of civic patriotism which presents an alternative to ethno-linguistic nationalism. The patriotism is built with Russianness at its core appealing to a spirit of *Russkii* which transcends beyond borders calling for all to unite under one Russian Federation. The concept of self appears to have been deliberately redefined with Russianness as its propagating force professing to amalgamate all of the polyethnic civilisations to vocalise this central identity (Blakkisrud, 2016), creating a higher association and a collective identity. It is a nostalgic-historical appeal to the era before the creation of new nation-states in 1991 when all were united under the emblem of the Kremlin. The Millennium Manifesto professing the need for reclaiming Russian patriotism projected three ideological pillars entailing *great-powers, state-centredness* and *social solidarity*. This comprises a revival and reinstatement of Russian identity which had for centuries been questioned as antithetical to the rest of Europe, but which remained the ideological force uniting the Russian people. Among the three aforementioned pillars, state-centredness and social solidarity remain the core ideals of a gradually evolving authoritarian liberalism aiming to reinvent ordoliberalism as an antithetical discourse to the Western ideals of democracy and freedom. Putin claimed that in the era of Western decadence and ideological uncertainty, Russia should rise as the beacon of traditional virtues and people should rally under this values-based national identity (Putin, 2013). In April 2015, the President wrote a rare article for Russia Pioneer Magazine resonating on the poverty of childhood and the hardships brought by the Second World War on his parents and overall on the Russian people (Putin, 2015a). These times and circumstances greatly influenced his psychological orientation, personality and values. These factors reflect a quest for survival, nurturing mental toughness and an enduring struggle for success in life. Expression of these childhood experiences has been instrumental in Putin's wide popularity and following among the Russian masses who contend that Putin relates to average Russians and that he has experienced Russia's glory, trials and downfall. The people's reverence of Putin lies also in his individualisation to reach out to the lower classes, unlike the Soviet elite which mostly included military uniformed men, who appeared to deliberately remain distant from the impoverished. Putin has also intelligently magnified his appeal through his frequent public appearances in sports events such as ice hockey, big game hunting, and especially displaying Judo skills – suggesting the character of Russian people as self-relying, strong and ingenious – presenting an alternative to the Baltic and European people as alternatives to the West. The new Russian identity appears to develop a discourse expecting to forge an ideological convergence between the Russian and European identities.

Putin projects modern Russia's strategies concerning the US in a similar manner where the economic and military inferiority does not mean a loss, nor is the strategising and decision making, merely cost-benefit analysis; but societal factors such as personality types, idiosyncratic values, sociological structures, ideologies, traditional roles and national values also play a fundamental role (Holsti, 1970). Influence of the prime years of the communist era on Putin's orientation when Communist ideology penetrated both the public sphere and the private sphere of the citizens set his psychology apart from the Russian youth of today. Galtung has referred to this continued penetration of ideology as the *social propagation pattern* which suggests that the opinions of the elite when accepted by the masses, continue to remain dominant even after the elite's priority changes and the issue is irrelevant (Galtung, 1967). The past glory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) continues to influence Putin and

becomes the basis for his vision of a globally powerful Russia. Moreover, Putin appears to suggest a sense of betrayal by the leadership of Michael Gorbachev and displays benign disapproval of his leadership. The following disenfranchised during the Yeltsin years of deliberately introducing liberalism and Western ideals in Russian society is to be countered by developing Russia's version of an open society. Once in the executive, Putin appealed to Russian history for national identity rather than looking toward the West. Putin's idea of leadership appears to set sources of decision-making as the individual who sets himself apart based on his values, abilities, and experiences (Rosenau, 1966), and projects himself as the opposite of Michael Gorbachev who presided over the fall of the Soviet empire. For Putin, the disintegration of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century (Sanders, 2014). While the US enjoyed its short-lived moment of unipolarity after 1991 (Krauthammer, 1990, 2002), Russia was experiencing both economic and political turmoil in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR. A resurging Russia under Putin projected its ethnic Russian sentiment as well as the ability to engage in conflict to display influence against the global influence of the US.

The Georgian War in August 2008 marked the beginning of the Russian resurgence. The origins of this conflict can be traced to the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia which led to the rise of Western-inspired President Mikheil Saakashvili to power. The conflict began with an ethnic-ideological spark between Tbilisi and two semi-autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which were supported by Russia and had a majority ethnic Russian population. This pattern of ethnic-ideological sources to military conflicts was later to be traced in conflicts between Russia and states with ethnic Russian populations that were part of the erstwhile USSR. These ethnic tensions date back before the time of the creation of the USSR and had lingered but rekindled with greater intensity after the disintegration of the USSR. In 1989, South Ossetia lobbied to separate from Georgian influence and join Russian North Ossetia, but the uprising was quashed by Georgia. Later in 1992, Russia was successful to reach a ceasefire agreement with them but maintained its presence by deploying its forces for the declared purpose of maintaining peace in South Ossetia (Nichol, 2009). Russian strategy was a direct outcome of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) plan to extend its membership to Georgia and Ukraine (Vendil Pallin & Westerlund, 2009); the US's plans for installing anti-ballistic missile shields in the Czech Republic and Poland; and the independence of Kosovo in February 2008. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia which had been a long-standing ally of Russia and this independence had been promptly authenticated and supported by the US and its western allies and the creation of a new state supported by the Western discourse of self-determination was regarded by Putin as interference of US in Russia's areas of interest and influence. The military manoeuvres and strategic-diplomatic realignment by the US had been declared by Putin in several interviews as the beginning of the new Cold War comprising geostrategic policies to encircle Russia by creating a network of military bases encircling Russia. US strategy was naturally likely to lead to a similar Russian response; therefore, NATO's growing influence has remained the most significant factor compelling Putin to advocate an assertive and militarily proactive approach in the region to display Russia's territorial claims.

Putin employed a specific personal media image in response to such conflicts, visiting South Ossetia, meeting civilians and displaying support to the wounded in hospitals. It was a repeat of the display of an image of a strong leader during the Chechen war. It was received as a personification of a leader defending and supporting mother Russia leading from the front – a comrade with an unflinching sense of duty seriously. Historically the Russian political psyche has greatly responded to centralised authority and Putin aimed to reinvent the legitimacy and submission to the executive authority. Kremlin closely watched the reaction of the US and Western leaders in the aftermath of the war (Asmus, 2010). Putin's continual projection and need for the revival of the past Soviet glory had been instrumental in creating a nationalist sentiment which projected a sense of duty to protect the Russian territory and interests as well as highlighted the significant and systematically growing threat of being isolated and military victimised. Putin projected the territorial consolidation as a necessity even if it meant annexations of states that were a part of Soviet Russia. These projections also contributed to building the justification for the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Putin had projected Russian claim over Crimea by it has become a part of the Russian empire in 1783, and a pertinent need for Russia to counter NATO's and indirectly increasing US's soft power and influence in Russian near abroad as in 1954, Nikita Khrushchev who was an ethnic Ukrainian had decided to merge Crimea to Ukraine (Dolya, 2016) as a gift to the Soviet Empire. However, after the disintegration of the USSR, Crimea was politically structured as a semi-autonomous region comprising its parliament and Council Ministers, but under the territorial control of Ukraine. Ukraine maintained its claim over Crimea and after the annexation protested the 2014 annexation based on treaties with Russia. Putin's response was to build a domestic sentiment based on ethnic and ideological sentiment by appealing to a large majority of Russian speaking population in Ukraine and regions such as Donbas, which had experienced lingering ethnic tensions and polarisations due to conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The origins of a critical crisis between Ukraine and Russia can plausibly be traced to the Orange Revolution

in 2004 which brought the pro-West government of Victor Yanukovich into government. Putin promoted a sentiment that the US and its European allies will continue to impose pro-Western leaders in Ukraine and Westernise this state. On the other hand, the pro-Western tilt combined with the Ukrainian revolution and a perceived regional domino effect appeared to unfold in the peripheries of Russia causing concern and magnifying the need for containment of Moscow's influence. Some of these developments also included Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010, protests in Belarus in 2006, Armenia in 2008 and Moldova in 2009 ([Ivanova, 2013](#)). The relative disassociation of Ukraine, Crimea and Sevastopol was projected by Moscow as benign interventions to remove the pro-Russian government ([Tsygankov, 2015](#)); demanding an assertive engagement and aggressive Russian revival of military policy along with reigniting the Russian ethnic sentiment in ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking people of Ukraine. Ukraine since 2004 remained turbulent, especially after the rise of a pro-Russian government in 2010 to be followed by the overthrow of the same government by the Euro Maidan Revolution in February 2014 which brought the pro-West government to Kyiv. Though Putin continued developing a strong ethnic and ideological narrative; the interference and intervention by the US, NATO and supporting the European States became clear and observable, which Putin promoted as a threat to Russian territorial integrity. Crimea and Russia refused to accept the new pro-West government justifying placing Russian troops in unidentifiable green uniforms deployed in Crimea who came to be termed as little green men – a term often associated with extra-terrestrial beings – but mostly suggesting aliens. Academic Realists suggested that though the West may not approve of Moscow's move; it may however understand the logic behind it ([Mearsheimer, 2014](#)). This strategy was intended to present an unambiguous message to the US – to not interfere in Russia's near abroad or influence independent states. Putin's Russia also clearly displayed that it will not hesitate to use military means to defend the regions it claimed. Crimea with its 1.5 million ethnic Russians out of the 2.2 million population chose to join Russia after a referendum on 16 March 2014 with 96.6 % votes. This mover was condemned by the West – but not with great enthusiasm – while Putin referred it to Crimea returning to its motherland ([BBC, 2014](#)), suggesting that Putin may see forceful occupation justified by holding a referendum afterwards. It is quite clear that Putin justified reclaiming lost Russian glory through the use of his image, the exploitation of Russian history and ethnic sentiment, the use of force and annexation and the employment of coercive pseudo-democratic strategies such as referendums to forge the legitimacy of such territorial gains.

Russia's resurgence extends to a major foreign policy decision taken on Syria. Under Putin; a renewed interest was observed as Russia began to build bilateral relations with almost every Middle-Eastern state ([Borshchevskaya, 2016](#)), while Russia extended the limits of its military manoeuvrability to gather the US response. On September 28, 2015, President Putin addressed the United Nations General Assembly after a decade and suggested that Russia will assume an assertive role in Syria. He also tried to gather political support by proposing to lead a coalition against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria ([Putin, 2015b](#)). To deliver on his words and without any delays, on 30 September 2015, Russia launched airstrikes in Syria. The Syrian civil war from March 2011 to 2018 has led to 465,000 dead and 12 million displaced Syrians ([AJ, 2018](#)). Former US President Barack Obama called the use of chemical weapons passing the red line – which will lead to a US response and intervention but no military action was taken ([Staff, 2017](#)), strengthening Putin's assessment that the US may not directly militarily confront Russia. Russia began backing the Assad regime and Putin's vocalisation of Russian geo-political interests intensified the Russian narrative and systematically disregarded international public opinion. Russia supported the Syrian regime diplomatically by vetoing several resolutions against it in the United Nations Security Council and logistically provided arms and participated in direct military operations – while the proclaimed agenda was to join the coalition against international terrorism and build political stability for the existing Assad regime. However, after economic sanctions by the US and Western Europe after the annexation of Crimea, Russia increasingly began to look towards the East and accelerated its Pivot to Asia strategy ([Pant, 2017](#)). The geostrategic and geoeconomic components of Russia's rebalancing in Asia and further East have included the ASEAN-Russia Summit in 2010, a combination of EAEU and SREB and the creation of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

South Asia attained a crucial status for Putin since the attack and invasion of Afghanistan by the US after 9/11. The strategic significance of Afghanistan had remained great as it had been the arena of a long-standing proxy war between the US and USSR from 1979 to 1989. US forces did not directly fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and Russia, therefore, remained the power that had relatively greater knowledge and experience of fighting in Afghanistan – which was likely to work for its advantage given a longstanding US war in Afghanistan and the possibility of growing confrontation with the US, as Russia's support to one or the other of the militant groups could have serious implication for Afghanistan. However, Putin's primary interests appeared in Afghanistan's stability and peace to ensure Russian interests in Central Asia. While the US-Afghan war has become a war of attrition despite having spent over one trillion dollars in the last seventeen years ([McCarthy, 2017](#)), to make matters worse for the US, by 2018 the Taliban attained control of over fifty per cent of Afghan territory. The IS developed

its Afghan base in Khorasan in January 2015 and posed direct military threats to the Taliban's influence ([BBC, 2017](#)). Russia claimed to be fighting IS in Syria and considers it a threat to spread fundamentalism in its proximate Central Asian republics. Russia has also admitted to being engaged in talks with the Taliban for regional peace and is in a convergence of interest with Iran on Afghanistan. The May 2017 visit of Iranian President Rouhani to Moscow and meeting with President Putin resulted in the joint declaration of both praising each other for peace efforts in Afghanistan ([Cone, 2017](#)). It pushed for greater influence in Afghanistan and by February 2018, there had been several accusations by Afghan officials of Russia providing weapons to the Taliban as was declared by the commander of Afghan Army's 207 Corps Brig Gen Muhammad Naser Hedayat who accused Russia, of actively militarily interfering in the province of Farah. However, the US reaction to these alignments was also natural. Once a high-profile case of secretive talks between the Taliban and Russia was a notable clandestine meeting between Mullah Mansour in Iran in 2016 who upon his return through Pakistan was killed in an American drone strike ([Rasmussen, 2017](#)). Russia also bore the diplomatic consequences of the confrontations as several Afghan peace initiatives had taken place with one of the most significant being the quadrilateral coordination group including Afghanistan, the US, Pakistan and China; where Russia took was not invited. Afghan war became a source of diplomatic wrangling with the first trilateral talks being held in December 2016 which included only Russia, China and Pakistan. Russia appeared compelled to exercise its influence in the diplomatic spheres and realise the importance of being a part of other regional alignments between states such as China, India, Iran and Pakistan. The second talks were held in February 2016 which extended the invitation to six parties including Afghanistan, Iran and India. In April, it extended to eleven party talks ([Mitra, 2017](#)). The key aspect is that the US was excluded from all the talks just as Russia had been excluded by all US-led Afghan talks. Russia learnt significantly from these military, strategic and diplomatic events. Resurgence and rebalancing for Russia required not to be ignored from strategic decision making and attain the capability and support of regional leadership to assume an eminent role in South Asia.

Implications for Pakistan

A major Russian foreign policy change under Putin has been the efforts toward normalisation of relations with Pakistan which appear moving to increase toward a new entente. The geostrategic confrontations in the twenty-first century have created a rise of traditional-civilisational powers. The most prominent and the extreme opposite of alignments during the Cold War years is the growing US-India nexus with India being posed as a challenger to counter China's regional and global influence. The strategy and partnership between US and India had been strengthened after the nuclear deal in 2008 and India's inclusion and access to the Nuclear Supplier's Group. In addition, the US supported India's military influence in Afghanistan. This naturally raised security concerns for Pakistan as this magnified the already existing existential threat by India and US defence deals favouring India over Pakistan – which had been a historical ally.

The initiation of relations with Russia began with the visit of President General Musharraf in 2003 ([Sangani & Schaffer, 2003](#)). Notable features include the lifting of the arms embargo by Russia in 2014 and the signing of a military deal to provide SU-35 weapons ([Hussain, 2018](#)). Later Pakistan Army's Chief General Raheel Sharif visited Russia in 2015 and maintained continuity in relations. In 2016 and 2017, bilateral military exercises were conducted, titled Friendship Drills, despite protests by New Delhi ([Gul, 2017](#)), Russia maintained a policy of engagement with Pakistan. Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesperson gave the state narrative that such a high-level initiative reflects this newfound entente as it has set the stage for translating political goodwill into a substantial partnership, in particular, in the field of defence. Pakistan has also supported the Russian initiative in the Afghan peace process. This partnership was successfully tested after the US-Afghan policy was released on 21 August 2017 which excluded Pakistan and called for a greater Indian role in Afghanistan and then suspended almost all security aid to Pakistan ([Mashal & Masood, 2018](#)). Russia was among the first countries to publicly support Pakistan and called for an end to pressuring Pakistan. Since 2018 trade between the two countries has significantly increased and defence assistance and cooperation have been initiated with Russia supplying Mi-35 assault helicopters and Russia supporting Pakistan's accession to the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It is quite observable that Putin's approach towards Pakistan is fundamentally different from the Russian leaders of the Soviet and post-Soviet era till Yeltsin, who appeared to view Pakistan as a US ally – therefore to be viewed from the perspective of the Cold War perceptual lens of confrontation between superpowers and their related allies. Putin appears to engage with Pakistan's leadership with a pragmatic approach and it will be quite likely that engagement for the support in energy and developmental sectors is initiated to be extended later to other areas of development.

Conclusion

Russia's strategic rebalancing primarily also consists of a massive revamping of its Pacific fleet with the inclusion of ballistic missile submarines (or SSBNs) that have been earmarked for the fleet. While Russia and China have not formulated a strategic defence alliance Putin's Russia is not merely content with peripheral control but seeks to reinvent itself as an important stakeholder in important conflict regions of the world. The beginning point in this new relationship should be the counter-terrorism collaborations which can then build into other avenues. In the eventuality of a triangulation of US-Afghan-India materialising; a strategic alliance between Russia-China-Pakistan will become more likely. However, it will be pertinent for Pakistan to also consider the possibility that the US will most likely pre-empt this possibility even if it means intervention in the internal affairs of Pakistan. Moreover, it will be important for Pakistan to consider that post-Cold War and post-9/11 discourse/s project the US as an imperial power while conveniently ignoring the imperial designs at the core of Russia under Putin – the memories of Soviet devastation in Afghanistan and the Soviet post at Michini post (Pakistan-Afghanistan border) are not very distant images, and Putin's Russia is likely to employ military means in future to impose its power in Ukraine and Georgia. Pakistan will benefit from bargaining with Russia for the much-needed economic development and energy supply while capitalising upon the possibilities of economic cooperation with China.

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