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India's Foremost 2017 Foreign Policy Challenge: China-Pakistan-Russia Troika

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The China-Pakistan-Russia Troika having emerged on the South Asian geopolitical scene now with undisguised contours and political signalling emerges as India's foremost foreign policy challenge in 2017.

The China-Pakistan Axis has been in existence from 1963 onwards but the addition of Russia to the China-Pakistan Axis leading to its emergence as the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika is a phenomenon of recent vintage.

Pakistan with the prospects of the drawdown of United States embedment in Afghanistan redoubled its efforts to develop a close relationship with Russia. Russia on the other hand with no logical game-changing strategic end-game moved closer to Pakistan more out of pique as a rebound to India reinforcing its strategic partnership with the United States.

China too seems to have prevailed heavily on Russia to reverse its gears in South Asia and tilt towards the Chinese protégé Pakistan. This move when viewed in totality suggests an effort by China and Pakistan in concert with Russia to emerge as a geopolitical game-changer in South Asia.

China-Pakistan –Russia Troika contours commenced unfolding in 2014 or so, with the emergence of strategic convergences on Afghanistan between these three nations on Afghanistan despite their inherent self-contradictions as highlighted in my SAAG Paper No.5961 dated 29 June 2015.

This month the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika was in full operation when it met in Moscow to discuss Afghanistan's instability, in their

perceptions. Oddly enough, Afghanistan as the central focus of the Troika Meet in Moscow was not invited. Afghanistan has strongly protested at this exclusion. Analytically, the China-Pakistan-Russia's uninvited meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs is ominous and India needs to take a note of it. This amounts to the Troika's first political intervention in Afghanistan, and that too with Russia in tow. It could be a precursor to more assertive interventions in Afghanistan.

The China-Pakistan-Russia Troika seems to have come to stay as a strategic grouping as no indicators exist to suggest that Russia's addition to the China-Pakistan Axis is only a passing phenomenon.

If that be so then the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika presents the foremost foreign policy challenge to the Indian foreign policy establishment in 2017. Indian diplomacy does not possess any leverage to undo this Troika and hence the next best option is that India indulges in serious diplomacy to ensure that the impact of this Troika on India's foreign policy interests and influence is limited.

The impact of China-Pakistan-Russia Troika on India's foreign policy and India's national security interests in the regional and global context does not appear to be significant. On the other hand, India has to be on a watch-out on its South Asian neighbourhood where at least China and Pakistan carrying the advantage of Russia in tow, would attempt to muscle-in on the foreign policy successes that India has gained under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka need heightened attention by Indian diplomacy. Nepal has to be prevailed upon that it is in the best interests of Nepal to stop playing the 'China Card' against India. India does possess leverages over Nepal which China cannot match.

Afghanistan as the special target of the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika impinges heavily on India's legitimate security interests in that country, where India has invested significantly in its national reconstruction and nation-building. India and Afghanistan jointly will have a big task in off-setting the Troika's, obviously aimed at edging out India from Afghanistan.

The China-Pakistan-Russia Troika cannot be limited to a discussion only as a challenge to Indian diplomacy but needs analysis in terms of its geopolitical and strategic impact on India and India's national security interests.

Viewing South Asia first, the most striking impact is that Russia which had earlier on ceased to be the countervailing power for India now can no longer be viewed by India even as an 'honest power broker' in mediation of South Asian disputes. Russia now emerges as the second intrusive power in South Asia allied to China and in pursuance of Chinese interests in South Asia. Pakistan by default emerges as the greater beneficiary in South Asia.

In the Middle East, the China-Pakistan Axis was not a major strategic actor. In the Middle East in 2017, Russia emerges with even a greater power profile than the United States. However, whether transference of Russian gains in the region to the China-Pakistan Axis is concerned materialises is debatable.

Some gains could possibly accrue to Pakistan where with the emergence of the recent Russia-Turkey-Iran meets in relation to Syria may prompt Russia to persuade Iran to shrink away from the India-Iran-Afghanistan Trilateral on the Chah Bahar Agreement signed some months ago. Moreso, when viewed in the context of Russia evincing keenness to participate in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor centring on Gwadar.

In South East Asia it is difficult to visualise that the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika would have any serious impact on India's national interests and foreign policy relationships.

East Asia also presents a similar picture as above. However, in this region, the India-Japan Special Strategic Partnership and the India-Vietnam Strategic Partnership along with South Korea is a strong front for the China-Russia strategic nexus. Pakistan is a non-entity in regional power dynamics in this region.

Central Asia presents the biggest political and diplomatic challenge to India in the context of the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika. Central Asia comprises the erstwhile 'republics' of the Former Soviet Union and where even today Russia enjoys considerable political influence. China enjoys great economic influence in the region. Pakistan will play the 'Islamic Card' with the countries of the region. With all three put together, the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika will limit India's efforts to tap the Central Asian energy markets, expanding Indian trade links and widening of Indian political influence.

India however can exercise some options in Central Asia with skilful diplomacy and raising the calibre of her diplomats posted in the region.

Concluding, two major conclusions that arise from the foregoing analysis are as follows and whose relevance will endure till India girds up her potential to strategically stand strongly and singly, alone:

- India must delink itself from organisations dominated by China and Russia, like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS. India must cease to be part of what are ostensibly countervailing groupings against the United States and could possibly end-up as confrontationist groupings against the United States. This has been constantly been espoused in my past writings. It is not in the interest of India.
- India's best interests lie in reinforcing the US-India Strategic Partnership to greater heights. United States could possibly add impetus in this direction under the forthcoming Trump Presidency.

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