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## Putin's Visit to India -October 2018-Comes with a heavy Pakistani Baggage

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The Russia-India Special Strategic Partnership spanning decades has lost its sheen for India with Russia's pivot in South Asia towards Pakistan as a piquant response to the growing US-India Strategic Partnership. Thus President Putin arrives in New Delhi on October 04 2018 for the Annual Dialogue with India carrying a heavy Pakistan-baggage.

Perceptionally in 2018, Russia has strategically embraced India's two most threatening military adversaries, namely China and Pakistan. So, in effect in 2018 the half a century old valued strategic relationship of India with Russia stands reduced to a mere defence equipment purchases in a commercial relationship. Russia is to be blamed for this downslide and devaluation of the long-standing strategic relationship between the two countries in recent years.

Russia needs to blame its foreign policy Presidential Adviser Zamir Kabulov for his more than active shift of Russian South Asian policies towards Pakistan. Under his influence, Russia also marginalised India over Afghanistan peace process by excluding India from the Moscow talks earlier this year.

Russian pivotal shifts in policy stances are also visible in Greater South West Asia where Russia has cooled-off from its high-voltage intensity in relations with Iran. It is becoming noticeable now and this may be arising from Iran's reluctance to toe the Russian line in Syria where Iranian influence counts more than Russian influence despite Russian sizeable military embedment in Syria.

President Putin needs to be admired for spearheading Russia's resurgence after a decade of frustrating confusion following the disintegration of the Former Soviet Union. But now with two decades of political power at the helm as Russia's President/Prime Minister,

something is missing in President Putin's geopolitical vision.

Geopolitically, India has ascended many steps up the ladder in the global strategic calculus and has emerged as a pivotal power in the security template of the Indo Pacific wide expanse. The only two countries deeply resenting India's recognition as an Emerged Power by the United States and the West are China and Pakistan. Obviously, as such recognition upsets the contrived balance of power on the doorsteps of the China-Pakistan Axis.

But why had President Putin to resort to an ill-advised gimmick of politically signalling to India by cosying up to Pakistan as retaliation for greater proximity in US-India relations? This too, in terms of stepping up greater cooperation in security and military spheres with the Pakistan Army?

President Putin and Russia by such ill-advised missteps has suffered deep perceptual losses in terms of Indian public opinion. Russia is no longer perceived as a staunch and stable friend of India especially when the growing proximity of US-India relations was not impinging on any of Russia's security interest.

Russian President Putin's visit to New Delhi this week in October 2018 stands reduced to many delegations thronging to New Delhi for making a pitch for selling their military hardware.

Russia was not making any great strategic favour to India by agreeing to sell the S 400 Air Defence Advanced Systems. It is a multi-billion dollar deal and would contribute to continued run of Russian defence production lines.

India's dependence on Russia for spare parts for its Russian –origin military hardware has reduced to about 60-70% and most of it is on commercial terms.

The point in the military sense that needs to be emphasised is that whatever advanced military hardware that Russia is selling to India has already been contracted for supply to China by Russia. So India is not getting any military edge over China when Russian policies are seen in the correct perspective shorn of past shibboleths.

Possibly the same trend may also pan out in Russia's emerging relations with Pakistan with more emphasis on military ties build-up.

India should not be bothered by the above two trends but India needs to factor-in these in its policy formulations by flawed membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, BRICS and participating in SCO Joint Military Exercises with Pakistan Army in Russia. It was a strategic fraud in my assessment as a military Veteran.

Moving on to the security discussions or geopolitics agenda with the Russian President in the next few days, there are hardly any points of

strategic convergence left between Russia and India, other than to make references to terrorism, global warming and such mundane topics which make good communiques but not signifying anything special.

Can Russia prevail over China to desist from aiding Pakistan's destabilisation policies in South Asia? Can Russia like the United States warn Pakistan to control terrorism groups operating from Pakistani Army safe-havens against India and Afghanistan? Can Russia sincerely advise China to arrive at some semblance of resolution of China-India boundary dispute?

Russia well knows that India has legitimate security interests in Afghanistan. Russia well knows that India stuck its neck out by not criticising the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. In 2018 India got the pay-back from Russia by being excluded from a Russia-led peace dialogue in Moscow because Russia wanted to humour Pakistan, its new-found surrogate in South Asia.

All of the above will fall on deaf ears of the Russian President in his current drive to emerge as an alternative centre of global power against the United States. The harsh reality is that India no longer figures as a possible asset in Russia and President Putin's strategic calculus.

The sooner the Indian policy establishment concludes that India in a changing geopolitical environment and which continues to churn, can best secure India's national security interests in cooperation with the United States, Japan and the West, the better it would be for India to think rationally in terms of geopolitical challenges posed by China's threatening military rise.

Neither the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation nor BRICS nor any grouping led and dominated by China with Russia tagging along as an appendix can ever turn out as strategic assets for India facing its multiple challenges.

In fact, the SCO includes both China and Pakistan as India's inveterate military foes. Why did India ever have to agree to join a China-Pakistan Axis dominated grouping? India went grievously wrong in this legacy-issue inherited from the previous Government.

While not privy to any out-of-public-domain discussions at Sochi Informal Summit between Russian President Putin and Indian PM Narendra Modi, but not visible openly are any signs of Russia jettisoning its Pakistan-baggage with great potential to impede retrieval of Russia's privileged relationship with India.

In Conclusion it needs to be said that while India must welcome the Russian President and extend all the honours and protocol due to his exalted position, the Russian President should be let known that Indian public opinion which cannot be discounted in India, perceives that he is coming along with a lot of Pakistan-baggage which Russia needs to put aside to regain the vitality in Russia-India ties.

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