
HAS RUSSIA LOST PATIENCE WITH INDIA?

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Russian attempts to punish perceived Indian transgressions could have serious impact on their relationship.

Although clouds have been gathering for the past few years around the relationship between Russia and India, recent events suggest that things may have come to a head sooner than expected. Russian attempts to court Pakistan, India's hostile western neighbor, in the last two weeks support such a conclusion.

First, on February 17, a rebel leader from Balochistan province in Pakistan, who had been residing in exile in Moscow for the last 18 years, switched sides. Dr. Jumma Marri Baloch has long been one of the major leaders of the movement in the western province of Balochistan to free itself from Pakistan. He reportedly designed the flag of the free Balochistan separatist movement. In his reconciliation interview with a Russian media outlet, Marri blamed India for hijacking the indigenous Baloch revolt. As the drama unfolded in Moscow, one may wonder whether it was a not so subtle a message to Delhi about Russian ability to embarrass India if such a need arises.

The next week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov welcomed his Pakistani counterpart, Khawaja Asif, to Moscow for a four-day trip. Moscow stated it was ready to help Pakistan increase its anti-terror capabilities — this can be read as a euphemism for providing arms to Islamabad.

Neither of these two developments will go down well with New Delhi. Considering that the first cannot be undone, one wonders what could possibly have gone so wrong for Moscow to take such a step.

China's rise, together with economic atrophy in Russia, has prompted a realigning of relations between Moscow and New Delhi. A weaker Russia has been cozying up to a wealthy China. In fact, after the West slapped economic sanctions on Russia, there was only one direction Moscow could go. The last of the Russia-China border disputes were resolved in 2004 and relations have been on an upswing since. While Russia has been having the best phase of its relationship with China, India has moved in the opposite direction.

Strong economic, diplomatic, and increasing military support from China to Pakistan is an irritant for India. India and China also have a long and disputed border in the Himalayas. A standoff in the border region between the two countries last summer threatened to blow into a military showdown but that disaster scenario was averted. Nevertheless, hostile rhetoric by Beijing during the dispute

is seen as increasing assertiveness on the back of China's newfound power and stature in world affairs. India is furthermore wary of Chinese moves around its neighborhood, primarily Beijing's use of its economic heft.

Adding two and two together, New Delhi may be doubtful of Russia coming to its support in case of serious problems with its northeastern neighbor. The growing strength of China and increasing Russian reliance on Beijing means that Moscow may have neither the will nor the means to help India in the future. To break the perceived China-Pakistan encirclement of India, New Delhi has been happy to find allies elsewhere.

India has built excellent ties with Japan. Strategic convergence has also brought India closer to the United States. Recently Australia joined the three countries in a much publicized quadrilateral grouping. The objective of the so-called Quad is to cooperate in exercising and increasing influence of the four powers across Asia, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The developing larger geostrategic picture in Asia pits land powers, Russia and China, against maritime powers. Indian friendship with Russia was an anomaly in the slow evolution of this competition. Unfortunately for Asia, this seems to be changing now as India tilts more and more toward the U.S.-led alliance.

India and Russia, to their credit, have been trying to increase their bilateral trade for the last two decades in order to develop a more positive relationship. They have achieved only partial success. One-way movement of armaments continues to be the major component of economic activity. India is the biggest market of foreign arms in the world; Russia has traditionally been among its largest suppliers. Recently though, India has increasingly looked to the United States and Israel for weapons. A string of military contracts has gone to the two Western suppliers, disappointing Moscow.

Russia has shown a willingness to accept the changes in the rules of the game. In 2010, when then-President Dmitry Medvedev visited India, he expressed Russian willingness to compete with other suppliers in the Indian market provided the contracts were transparent and fair. But exasperation has gotten the better of Moscow at times. Senior Russian officials have also criticized Indian procurement methods and reacted to decisions with disdain.

The government of India is hard-pressed to cater to Russian interests. The armed forces, particularly the Air Force, have been seeking to diversify their base by procuring Western weaponry. The intelligentsia, though, is tired of expensive imports and is keen on spinning up indigenous development. To add to New Delhi's woes, Western officials are now also pressuring their Indian counterparts for lucrative armament contracts. The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency and his push toward selling American products abroad is unlikely to ease this pressure.

A new generation of leaders in India are aware of their own strengths and wish to play the game on their own terms. The fact that the booming Indian economy is already twice the size of the Russian economy is not lost on them. Moreover, the explosive expansion in private media, in the previous decades, has led to intense focus on every defense deal that the government makes.

Recently the saga of joint development of a fifth-generation fighter aircraft has cropped up as a sticking point between India and Russia. After initially agreeing to jointly design and develop the futuristic aircraft, New Delhi is having second thoughts about it. The complaints range from

inadequate work share to lack of technology transfer. The aircraft is said to lack stealth features while its engine may lack thrust. The Indian Air Force (IAF) has made up its mind against the project, which it deems too costly.

Much to the surprise and anger of Moscow, the IAF has asked for a classified briefing on the F-35 from Lockheed Martin. If India does not have funds to spare for the Russian planes, how can it possibly muster funds for the F-35? This is the question that is being asked. The Indian pilots, meanwhile, want to know why they should pay for a plane that the Russian air force itself is unwilling to fly.

In order to convince the Indians about the viability of the program, the Russian Defense Ministry ordered 12 planes on February 8. It has also deployed them in Syria to counter the media narrative against the fighters. The advanced planes are not needed in the Syrian conflict, where the Russian air forces primary role is to bomb insurgents, but Moscow has taken a leaf out of the book of Western players. Both Rafale and Eurofighter have been used in Syria and Libya despite not being needed in the primarily uncontested bombing roles. But IAF has remained distant to the planes, claiming them to be too similar to the Sukhoi 30, which India already has in its arsenal.

Russia has threatened to go ahead with another partner for the fifth-generation fighter aircraft if India is unable to make up its mind on the long-delayed project. The invitation to the Pakistani foreign minister seems to have flown after the leaking of IAFs desire to have a look at the F-35.

India has benefited immensely from Russian friendship. Strategic projects such as the BrahMos cruise missile and nuclear submarines have been a success mainly due to Russian help or partnership. A short-sighted policy could endanger Indian defense preparedness in the long run and make it dependent on the West, which might be even less inclined to share technology. On the other hand, Russian highhandedness could also push India more toward the West, with which it has greater strategic coherence now. Moscow also perhaps needs to understand the Indian governments limitations in pushing a product to its defense forces. India has been unable to sell indigenous products to its own army or air force. In such a scenario, it is highly unlikely that it will achieve the same with Russian products.

Moreover, India continues to be a big market for Russian arms despite the occasional hiccups. New Delhi is nowhere close to attaining self-sufficiency in armament production and will continue to be dependent on foreign manufacturers for its needs for decades. According to SIPRI, Russia supplied India with 68 percent of its weapons imports, compared to 14 percent from the United States and 8 percent from Israel, between 2012 and 2016. This suggests that Russia continues to maintain its hold on the Indian arms market despite some contracts going the other way.

With China decreasing its imports of Russian arms, the loss of Indian market would hurt Russian industry even more. Even if Moscow manages to replace India with Pakistan, it is unlikely that Islamabad would buy Russian arms in the same quantity as India, owing to its much smaller economy.

In geostrategic terms, an India-Russia split would harden the periphery versus core competition that is taking shape. Trumps pressure on Pakistan at a time Russia is inviting it in with open arms could also lead to a change in its outlook. While India would be locked out of Central Asia, Russia would also end up becoming even more dependent on China. It is tough to say which state may end up with the worse of the bargain.

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