

## THE RUSSIAN RESURGENCE AND SOUTH ASIAN REGION

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### Abstract

Russia has inherited the status of a great world power on the basis of its history, geopolitical position, military might and diplomatic importance. Despite its weak economy, Russia still poses a credible nuclear threat to the USA. It has been maintaining its influence and control in its traditional sphere of influence—the Baltics, the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, the changing regional strategic environment, especially in Middle East and South Asia, has compelled Russia to look beyond its immediate security realm to safeguard its traditional areas of interests. The enhanced strategic cooperation between India and the US, possible US exit from Afghanistan, and the growing strains in Pak-US relations are luring Russia to expand its role in the South Asian region.

**Key words:** Russia, Resurgence, South Asia.

Looking at the history of international politics of the Westphalian state system (since 1648), one observes a handful of states dominating the international scene; Russia is permanently one of them. The Russian Federation is the inheritor of Tsarist Russia's and Soviet Union's great power status. The country's history, its geopolitics and military might keep the Russian quest for great power status always alive. Despite its disintegration in 1990-91, the nostalgia of being a great power never died down; the former elite of the Soviet state and military continue to pine for their lost status and power.

The declining trend in Russian power was checked to some extent by Vladimir Putin's economic and political efforts to put the Federation back on track. Resultantly, within a span of one decade, Russia was showing signs of recovery on the economic, political and diplomatic fronts. Opposition to the invasions of Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), the Georgian war (2008), support to Iran and Syria against Western efforts to isolate them, and building economic

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blocs with emerging economies such as Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), manifested its resurgence at the global level. Although, a declining economy and weakened military power compelled the Russian Federation to shrink its role in the immediate/vital areas of influence; i.e. in the Baltics, Central Asia and Caucasus, but it also expanded its influence in other regions, especially in the Middle East and South Asia to benefit from the anti-American sentiments and waning western influence there.

This opens a fascinating and interesting area for academic research. This paper is an attempt to look at Russia as a Great Power in the present international system that has the potential to rise through the interplay of its economic and military power. This would of course depend on its ability to maintain its control over its traditional spheres of influence. The objective of the research is to analyze the hegemonic nature of its relationship with the former areas of its domain and its prospects in some new spheres, especially South Asia, where it is exerting for gaining influence.

### **Theoretical Context**

Theoreticians have tried to find some governing rule for the phenomenon of expansion and contraction. One of the best explanations is given by Paul Kennedy in his analysis of the *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.<sup>1</sup> It is basically the combination of politics and economics that explains the relative power of a Great Power. Kennedy states that economic progress and military strength are the two faces of the same currency. "... the interaction between economics and strategy, as each of the leading states in the international system strove to enhance its wealth and its power, to become (or to remain) both rich and strong." "Economic change" provides the context for the study of "military conflicts." The relative decline and rise of a Great Power is not only ascribed to long wars but also to the relative decline and rise of the economy at home. Similarly, economic boom itself does not confer power on the state, unless it is carefully translated into political power.<sup>2</sup>

It also comes very close to the "Mercantilist" approach of foreign policy. The economic power of a state is translated into military strength meaning bigger army, more weapons, improved military technology, better skills and military occupations. On the other side, the military muscle is used for economic expansion. Market occupations, spheres of influences, control of routes, influence on economic institutions etc., are some of the modes through which this economic power is exercised. Great Power decline happens when this delicate balance of hard-power between the economy and military power

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<sup>1</sup> See, Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000* (London: Fontana Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

is disturbed. Sometimes, military over-expansion drains the economic resources and the state crumbles unable to bear this burden. Sometimes, the economic rise is not efficiently turned into military might.

Some basic features of Kennedy's analysis are highlighted here: First, it is an analysis of Great Powers who have expansionist ambitions. Second, the power of a state is the efficient combination of its military and economy. Third, power is relative; the power of a Great Power can be judged only in comparison to other similar powers. Fourth, power is mercantilist in nature, i.e., the motive of military is economy and the motive of economy is military. Lastly, power is dynamic; the polar distribution of power in the international system is never static. Relative gains and losses of power keep putting pressures on the existing system.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Russian Resurgence**

The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991; it is not easy for a state that has been disgruntled to regain its strength and remain viable at the international level. The Russian Federation is a success story in this regard. The collapse of the USSR was an economic collapse. The crumbling Soviet economy could not sustain the out-stretch of a massive empire. The twenty years of the post-Soviet era are years of struggle for real recovery from that economic melt-down. This era, for its economic policies, can be divided into two; the Yeltsin era and the Putin era.

Boris Yeltsin won the elections of June 1991, and on the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev in December, became the head of the Russian Federation. He ruled Russia till December, 1999. He embarked on a massive economic reform in the country. These reforms were aimed at turning the socialist system into a functioning capitalist one. The drive seemed to be too radical and not commensurate with the Russian realities. So, a decade of economic set-backs and down-turn ensued. Yeltsin's economic reform package is called "Shock Therapy." It can also be called a neo-liberal approach in economy. This policy had four main objectives. First, it was liberalization, which meant leaving the matters of price to the market forces of demand and supply without state intervention. The second was financial stabilization, which meant a tight monetary policy. Privatization was the third objective. The fourth element of this strategy, was internationalization, which meant to open the Russian economy to the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

This "Shock Therapy" did subject the economy to shocks but evidently did little else. Whether because of the policy or its bad implementation, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Kotz and Fred Weir, *Russia's Path From Gorbachev to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Russian economy performed worse than it did in the 1980s. Budget deficit fell to 25 per cent of the GDP, foreign investment failed, as the economy was starved by the loss of resources that came from its former parts. To make up for the loss, it borrowed heavily from the domestic and international financial market. Financially, Russia was facing a worse crisis than Europe did during the 1930s crisis. The “financial crises” of 1998 made things even worse. This crisis originated in East Asia in 1997, and then gradually hit all the financial hubs of the world; Russia was hit in mid-1998. But, in its case, it was the culmination of a decade of bad economic policies, not the immediate effect of that world financial crisis. In August 1997, Russia declared that it can no longer pay its debts, and the Rouble was devalued. In the real GDP index, 1998 was the lowest since 1991, and so it was in real gross investment.<sup>5</sup> On the positive side, private lending institutions of Russia were having a good day. The energy sector was also expanding and was to play an important role in the coming years. Despite poor performance generally, the economy had started to show signs of recovery as it entered the next decade.

Vladimir Putin was appointed prime minister of Russia in August 1999 by Yeltsin. Putin became president of Russia in March 2000 and his tenure as the most influential leader of Russia continues. For his good luck, the Russian economy showed signs of recovery which lasted till 2007. Putin adopted a strong state-centric policy in his quest for bringing in discipline in the economy. His authoritative style of government lended a supportive hand to the nascent capitalist system that seemed to be picking up. This combination of “liberal economy” and “illiberal politics” seemed to be paying back. The catch word for the entire Putin era can be phrased as “economy for state.” His “oil-mercantilism” seems to have given a short-term boom and a long-term confidence in the ability to turn it into global expansionism.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian economy started to grow in 1999. The real GDP has been rising since then, reaching the 1990 levels. It was basically the result of currency devaluation that had made Russian imports cheaper for others. The second and more lasting reason was the sudden rise in the volume and price of oil and gas which are Russia’s main exports. This feature of petro-exporting economy of Russia was to become the main source of future speculations about its possible resurgence. Oil and gas constituted the highest out-put giving sectors of the economy in 2005 and Russia was able to keep its growth rate above 5 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Treisman, “Rethinking Russia: Is Russia Cursed by Oil?,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol.63, no.2 (Spring/Summer, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Nina Poussenkova, “The Global Expansion of Russia’s Energy Giants,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol.63, no.2 (Spring/Summer, 2010).

Critics argue that Russian growth is faced with some unhealthy patterns, namely the heavy dependence of this growth on oil. They say Russia has become a single commodity economy. The 2008 financial crisis highlighted the fragility of the Russian rise. Exactly, ten years after the financial crisis of 1998, Russia had to face a similar situation. This time the crisis was coming from the USA, where the stock exchange collapse had sent shock waves across the world; it hit Russia hard. The rouble value to the American dollar eroded and there was a massive asset shift away from Russia. The budget deficit soared as did inflation; ultimately the economy suffered a negative growth. Just as in 1998, it was again coupled with massive fall in the oil price in the international market<sup>8</sup> which lowered from \$47 per barrel in July 1998 to \$30 per barrel in December that year. As the Russian economy solely relied on oil money, the effect of the huge cut in revenue was tremendous. The position of the Gazprom fell from the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest to the 36<sup>th</sup> company in the world.

Interestingly, the economy soon recovered as oil prices started going up in 2009. This increased the petro-income and lowered the budget deficit; investors' trust deficit decreased; foreign reserves multiplied; and the growth rate once again became positive. But, it is projected that the budget deficit would remain problematic through 2012.<sup>9</sup> Until 2011, the economy had been growing sluggishly. Its current rate, as according to Putin himself, is 4.2-4.3 per cent; but, the IMF estimates put it at 4.1 per cent this year, and 3.5 per cent for 2012.<sup>10</sup> With a further expectation of decrease in oil prices, there are further warnings of down-turns. The current Euro-zone crisis has, also, had negative impact on Russia.

The 2012 growth forecast is not above 3.7 per cent, below the estimates of 4.1 per cent in 2011. The inflation rate is expected to go down due to the depreciation of the rouble against dollar, from around 6.4 per cent to around 5 per cent next year. On the whole the indolent growth trend, which is a global phenomenon, is not expected to change for the near future. As the economy is closely connected with the energy revenue, analysts are worried that it is necessary that the price of oil remains at \$110 per barrel, which looks unlikely.<sup>11</sup> But the trend of this quarter of the year is quite optimistic as price is going up, nearing the optimum level of \$111 per barrel.<sup>12</sup> Taking a holistic view, according to a World Economic Forum report, if states are ranked into

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, "Internal and External Impact of Russian Economic Crisis," Russian/NIS Centre, Paris: *French Institute of International Relations*, March 2010, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

<sup>9</sup> John Bowker, "Russia Trims Economic Outlook Amid Global Crisis," *Reuters*, December 11, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> "Russian Central Bank Warns of Slower Economic Growth Risks," *RIA Novosti*, December 15, 2011, [www.en.rian.ru](http://www.en.rian.ru).

<sup>11</sup> "Russia's Future: The Cracks Appear," *Economist*, December 10, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> "Oil Likely to Stay High despite Good Supply: IEA," *Reuters*, May 11 2012.

five stages of development, Russia falls in the third one.<sup>13</sup> Russia, a state aspiring to be at par with the super-power, needs to accelerate the process of economic modernization and rate of growth. Militarily, Russia still is a giant, the second largest after the USA. The Cold War balance of power in this respect has not changed. Some statistics of the current year are interesting. As on the first July 2011, the total defence budget was \$56,000 million, the total active force was 1,200,000. But, it is also noteworthy that as compared to the pre-1991 estimates<sup>14</sup> there is a decline. Russia meets the cost of this massive military budget with its oil revenues as it has the largest oil and gas production; the USA is second and China fourth.

Though the 7<sup>th</sup> in proven oil reserves, it is the largest among the present great powers. In consumption it is the 6<sup>th</sup> behind the USA, China, Japan and India.<sup>15</sup> It reflects the decline in industrialization.

The statistics of Russian power in relation to other contemporary powers show it as 4<sup>th</sup> in active force after China, USA and India. It is the number one in land-based weapons followed by India, China and the USA. In naval force, Russia has yet to improve as it ranks 8<sup>th</sup>, even behind states like Iran and Turkey. It is also the 6<sup>th</sup> among those having an aircraft carrier. In the air, it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> among aircraft possessors, after the USA and China. Russia is the 5<sup>th</sup> defence spender, after the USA, China, UK, and Japan, respectively. But in the defence purchasing parity—estimate of potential for defence spending—Russia is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest, after USA, China, Japan, India and Germany.<sup>16</sup>

It is important that in non-conventional arms, Russia is the only country at par with USA. These and some other statistics show that Russia is a moderate power that has an overarching military strength, and needs economic potentials to sustain and keep the level up.

The most severe criticism on Russian military is that it is still a socialist army that relies on bulk over efficiency. When Putin came to power, he embarked on a plan to modernize the armed forces. Down-sizing and more efficiency were the main objectives to be achieved.<sup>17</sup> In 2007, Anatoly Serdyukov, a businessman, was appointed the defence minister to ensure effective military reforms. So, the team of Putin is bent on down-sizing and modernizing the Russian army, but the financial constraint is in the way. Yet, last year, Medvedev came up with his ambitious plan of modernizing the

<sup>13</sup> Margareta Drzeniek Hanouz and Alexey Prazdnichnykh, ed., “The Russia Competitiveness: Laying the Foundation for Sustainable Prosperity,” *World Economic Forum*, 2011, [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Legvold, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 324.

<sup>15</sup> See, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), [www.eia.gov](http://www.eia.gov).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Russian Military Spending Soars,” *RT-Novosti*, February 25, 2011, [www.en.rian.ru](http://www.en.rian.ru).

military by 2020. He plans to spend some \$650 billion on the project. It is to be seen if this project gets the promised funds unlike all previous cases.<sup>18</sup>

Politically, Putin is known for his assertive rhetoric in foreign policy. In this regard, his Munich speech of 2007 is famous. In this speech, he lamented the Unipolarity of USA and that the latter has “overstepped its national borders in every way.” He warned against the US unilateralism and assured that new economic centres of the world would translate their economic power into political power and turn the world into a multipolar system. He saw no reason to replace the United Nations (UN) with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). At the end, he asserted Russia’s ability to maintain its independent policy.<sup>19</sup>

No doubt, that speech may have been delivered on the strength of a decade long growth of above 5 per cent. But now things are different. The 2008 crisis and the present Euro-zone crisis must have diluted some of that assertiveness. But, Putin’s paper which outlined the “Eurasia project,” created much debate in the international circles.<sup>20</sup> For some, it was a project for creating Eurasia as a new pole; while, for some it was again Putin’s rhetoric to win the elections in December 2011.

Domestic conditions do play an important role in defining the foreign policy of a country. Russian politics is divided into four ideologies; Nationalists, Centralists, Eurasianists, and Liberal Atlantists. Boris Yeltsin was Liberal but Putin is Eurasianist meaning there is no clarity in Russian policy objectives. Reading the history of the Putin era, it becomes evident that Russia may resort to any of these four brands of policies under different pressures.<sup>21</sup> The dignity of a grand past, presence of a big military, the enormous size of the country compared to neighbours and the strategic location are factors that might prompt Russian leaders to assume a proud posture. But falling growth rate, a single commodity economy, lack of industrialization, and bad performance in the war against Georgia (in August 2008) are not the kind of factors that might justify such assertive policies to the analysts of the Russian situation. They demand tangible evidence of Russian strength.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Elena Ponomareva, “Eurasian Project a Threat to New World Order,” *Strategic Culture Foundation* (Online Journal), October 10, 2011, [www.strategic-culture.org](http://www.strategic-culture.org).

<sup>21</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee, “Rethinking Russia: Russia, Ukraine, and Central Europe: The Return of Geopolitics,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer, 2010).

In 2000, after becoming the president, Putin revisited the state policy and brought about three sets of documents: the National Security Concept,<sup>22</sup> the Foreign Policy Concept,<sup>23</sup> and the Military Doctrine<sup>24</sup> that together highlighted two important features of Putin's Russia. Firstly, they identified the "vital areas" for Russia and asserted the latter's commitment to the stability of and control over these areas. Secondly, they can be interpreted as giving the outlines of Russia's new foreign policy directions. These can be summarized as diversification, pluralism and multipolarity. Russian relations with its immediate neighbours are greatly affected by these concepts.

Economization of politics is another aspect of Putin's era. What is good for the energy sector is good for Russia has been the catch-word for the entire decade. Energy giants of Russia, like Gazprom, make their own independent foreign policies and have a considerable say in domestic affairs; they engage in trade negotiations, make contracts for construction of new pipelines and take up major projects in their field of action. One of the more important projects, of interest and concern to international powers is the "Euro-Asian project" of 2011. Russia is set to form a new union of Euro-Asian republics, and to turn it into an effective alternative power-centre in international politics.<sup>25</sup> The effect and nature of these policies would be analyzed in the coming sections, where Russia's relations with its immediate neighbours and some international powers would be discussed.

Critically speaking, Russia, driven by an ambitious leadership has a giant military supported by a weak economy. This military is no doubt number two in the world, yet, its lack of efficiency and want of modernity is obvious. The Georgian war of 2008 showed that Russia still relies on traditional warfare. On the other side, the USA in its war in Afghanistan has demonstrated how it has moved ahead in military technology and strategy. Economically, the truth is even harsher. Russia has moved backwards from a modern economy to a third-world economy of raw-material exports. It's a single commodity economy, and that commodity being oil, it is now even more susceptible to the global ups and downs. Lack of liberalization is now manifesting in the shape of political unrest. The December 2011 elections further eroded the power of Putin and his Eurasianist team. If the current economic down slide persists, one cannot be sure of Putin's control over national affairs.

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<sup>22</sup> James T. Quinlivan and Olga Olikier, "Nuclear Deterrence in Europe: Russian Approaches to a New Environment and Implications for the United States," *RAND Corporation*, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *FAS Federation of American Scientists*, June 28, 2000, [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org).

<sup>24</sup> "Russia's Military Doctrine," *Arms Control Association*, May 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Slawomir Mazurek and Guy R Torr, "Russian Eurasianism: Historiography and Ideology," *Studies in East European Thought*, vol. 54, no. 1/2 (2002): 105-123.



Analysis of the historical ups and downs of Russia will suggest that it is a major player in world affairs and will continue to be in the predictable future. Great powers write the story of world politics. Russia is one of them. This research has reasons to consider Russia as one of the most influential powers of the time. First, it has the glory of its past that informs its perception of its own status as a world power and its relations with other states. Second, it has a strong military second only to the USA. Military might is a strong tool in international diplomacy to advance a state's policies. Third, Russia has strong will to translate its power into palpable gains. Two decades of consistency in policies and single minded pursuit of vision under Putin show the country's political strength. It is the only great power that is proactively opposing the unipolar hegemonic world order. Fourth, being virtually a continent itself, its geopolitical importance is not likely to diminish. Fifth, its economy seems to be its Achilles heel, but the silver lining is that even in the worst of times it has been able to sustain a respectable above 2 per cent growth rate solely on its domestic resources. Very few powers have this economic potential.

### **Traditional Spheres**

Russian expansion has three directions: West, South and East. The Russian North is an ice-shield not fit for human existence. The Baltics are on its west, the Caucasus on the south-west, Central Asian republics on the south and the Asia-Pacific on its east. Historically, these have been the spheres of Russian out expansion. So, a resurgent Russia will be inclined to push for control over these regions.. Many political analysts call these four regions as the "Traditional Spheres" of Russian influence. Since the Asia-Pacific region has now grown much beyond the reach of Russia, its exclusion from the traditional spheres is timely.

The Baltic region is in the extreme north-west of Russia. The Baltics and the Scandinavian countries are separated by the Baltic Sea. It comprises three states; Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. These small states, apart from their own ethnic population, host nearly 30 per cent Russians. This region has, since the days of the ancient Russian Empire, served as the outer most stop for Russian expansion. Presently, it enjoys independence that it acquired in September 1991 from the former Soviet Union.

Russia started a gradual disengagement from the Baltic region. This slow yet committed withdrawal reflects the Russian policy of diversification with regard to the states of the traditional spheres. Ground troops had been withdrawn by September 1994;<sup>26</sup> but concerns about Russian surveillance posts in the region continued to haunt the area. In this connection, the Large

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Lucas, "The Fall and Rise and Fall Again of the Baltic States," *Foreign Policy*, (July/Aug 2009).

Phased-Array Radar (LPAR) system was dismantled in 1995 from Latvia. The Organization for Economic and Security Co-operation (OESCC) provided the platform for these talks. Complete withdrawal of surveillance facilities from the region was completed by 1998 with the help of USA. So, by 1999, it had been ensured Russia had no military presence in the region.<sup>27</sup>

However, Russia includes the region among the areas vital to its interests. The Baltics provide the major transit route to and from the European Union. More than 15 per cent of Russian trade in energy passes through the Baltic ports. So, a safe and stable Baltic region is in the vital interest of Russia. Apart from transit, the Slavic minorities in the region also call for Russian attention to the domestic affairs of the countries. Estonia and Latvia have around 30 per cent of the Slavic population. Nationalists in Russia raise their voice for these minorities. The issue of “image” is another aspect of Russian interest in the region. The region being its traditional sphere, Russia must assert its great power status there. Since Putin’s coming into power, Russian policy toward the Baltics can be described as that of “assurance without engagement.” Russia assures that its dominance is singular and firm, but avoids direct manifestation of its power. After military disengagement, Russia solely relies on its economic leverage in its dealings with the countries of the region.<sup>28</sup>

Russia knows that it has a huge military, and the states in the region know it also. This is how the message of Russian power is sold in the area. The uneven balance in the sizes of the two sides makes it impossible for the region to pose any tangible resistance to the dominance of Russia.<sup>29</sup> In addition, there were fears that Russia had some nuclear installations in Kaliningrad, though strongly denied by Russia.

Moreover, the states of the region depend on Russian energy for domestic consumption. Russia is the major importer of their exports; this gives Russia enough space in its dealings with the region. Estonia and Latvia once alleged that Russia used the Slavic minorities as a tool to interfere in their domestic politics. These minorities would create law and order situation and sometimes were found guilty of organized crimes. But, for the last couple of years, they have satisfactorily incorporated their Slavic minorities in their society. The Baltics therefore are safely in the Russia basket. Though the states of the region joined North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) in 2004, yet they are moving even closer in the Russian orbit. One reason for this is the economic hurdles these small states are facing

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew C. Winner, “The Baltic States: Heading West,” *Washington Quarterly*, (Winter 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Leonid Karabeshkin, “Russian Baltic Policy-Coherent Incoherence,” *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*, no. 19 (2007).

<sup>29</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, “Rethinking Russia: Russian Dilemma in a Multipolar World,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer, 2010).

since they joined the EU. After a massive economic performance since their independence, the Baltics are in real trouble. The massive lending and borrowing mechanism of the EU has turned the table on these small states. So, Russia is the ultimate resort for these states to sustain their growth. Secondly, these small states now realize that NATO is not a viable option for their security. First, the over-arching military power of Russia together with its physical contiguity, renders the defence shield of NATO with its far-off headquarters as useless. Second, USA is not very enthusiastic about giving any tangible security guarantees to these states, because it does not want to intrude into the very backyard of Russia and spark any negative reaction.<sup>30</sup> Russia is trying to build up a positive relationship with this region by acting less belligerent and more accommodative in mutual dealings, which has secured the region to Russia satisfactorily. So, the states of the region are now having direct talks with Russia and do not use NATO or EU as a platform for mutual relations.

The Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas comprises Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. These one Muslim and two Orthodox Christian states with multiple ethnic compositions pose a testing ground for Russia to prove that it is a more-than-Slavic power. The region also stretches northwards into the southern flank of Russian Federation, which is termed as the North Caucasus. Russia continues to regard it as an important region and has maintained her presence there since the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even Yeltsin stood tough in his dealings with Georgia and North Caucasus. Putin's new security policy is very much focused on this region.<sup>31</sup>

Geo-strategy is the top priority of Russia in the Caucasus. This is the very "Euro-Asia" that Russia wants to form into a union. Russian survival as a great power depends on safe access to the Mediterranean. And, access to that sea is possible if Russia has a control over the Caucasus. Moreover, the whole energy trade of Russia passes through these states whose collaboration is vital for Russian interests.<sup>32</sup>

Second, political stability is also of importance. The South Caucasus has the potential of sending reverberations into the North. The Islamic separatist movement in Chechnya is a problem for the stability of the entire Russian state and its spheres of influence. In August 1999, Muslims tried to form the republic of Dagestan. Russia does not want a recurrence of such events. The

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<sup>30</sup> Edward Lucas, "The Fall and Rise and Fall Again of the Baltic States," *Foreign Policy*, (July/Aug 2009): 4.

<sup>31</sup> Fatma Asli Kelkitli, "Russian Foreign Policy in South Caucasus under Putin," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, (Winter 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bishku, "The South Caucasus Republics and Russia's Growing Influence: Balancing on a Tightrope," *Gloria Centre*, Global Research in International Affairs, August 21, 2011, [www.gloria-centre.org](http://www.gloria-centre.org).

“Red Rose Revolution” of Georgia in 2004 was another such unwanted event.<sup>33</sup>

Third, from a purely economic point of view too the region has its importance. It is an important energy market for Russia. Their energy needs are being fulfilled by the supplies from Russia. This is manifest from the fact that even though Georgia had a war with Russia in 2008, it abstained from cancelling its energy deals with Moscow. The on-going pipeline politics has much to do with the conditions in this region. Moreover, research indicates that the Caspian sea-bed holds the third largest reserve of oil in the world, after Saudi Arabia and Russia. In this connection, a tri-lateral treaty among Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan was signed in 2003 to distribute 64 per cent of their share in this resource. So, to protect these vital interests, Russian policy amounts to near domination of the region, its ultimate backyard.<sup>34</sup>

Russia does not hesitate in intervening in the region for the sake of stability. Azerbaijan and Armenia have a controversy over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia provides the ultimate forum to settle the issue. Similarly, when the two northern parts of Georgia, North Ossetia and Abkhazia were racked by separatist movements, Russia intervened in the war in August 2008 to give them independence. Russia declared them both as sovereign states. Secondly, Russia plays its role as a balancer among the conflict prone states of the region. Especially, between hostile Azerbaijan and Armenia. To add to it, Azerbaijan is left with no other route to sell its energy west-wards than using the Russian territory. Thirdly, Russia provides most of the region’s energy needs. Armenia is completely dependent on Russian imports. Azerbaijan is also dependent for its energy transit. Besides, Russia becomes the ultimate destination for the products of these states. Russia also has ability to disrupt the economic conditions as it did in the case of Georgia when it had a war with it. So, economics is also a great tool available to the Russian decision makers to leverage its position in the region.

The Caucasus is a major vehicle of Russian resurgence. But it is also volatile in the sense that USA and Turkey pose alternative sets of pressures. The presence of a splinter state within the region in the shape of Georgia is also of serious concern. Russia is trying to build up a partnership with Turkey to have strategic depth.<sup>35</sup> Russian influence in the region is great but just short of total control.

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<sup>33</sup> Craig R. Nation, “Russia, the United States and the Caucasus,” *Strategic Studies Institute* (SSI, the US Army War College), February 2007, [www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil](http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil).

<sup>34</sup> Igor Muradyan, “Russian Policy in the Black Sea/Caucasus Region and Armenian Security,” *Policy Forum Armenia*, October 19, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Zaur Shiriyev, “Turkish-Russian Strategic Depth in South Caucasus,” *Hurriyet Daily News* (Turkish National Daily), May 20, 2010.

The Central Asian Republics (CARs) comprise five states: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This is the region of the famous Great Game. Russia deems it important for its political stability and economic viability.<sup>36</sup> Russian interests in this region are not different from its interests in the other two regions. Geo-strategic and economic considerations incline Russia towards Central Asia. It is also termed as the heartland of Euro-Asia. Both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are energy rich and are the littoral states of Caspian Sea.<sup>37</sup> In this regard, Russian policy towards the region is difficult to summarise. Russia finds it difficult to give a clear and open policy towards the region. Perhaps, the presence of China and USA poses the greatest challenge in this regard.<sup>38</sup> Looking at the conduct of Russia in the region, one can see Russian policy of diversification at play. It is trying to build individual policies for individual states of the region. It has full engagement with Kazakhstan; a relationship of dominant/dependence with Tajikistan; balanced relations with Uzbekistan; a band-wagoning type of ties with Kyrgyzstan; and, selective engagement with the aloof Turkmenistan.<sup>39</sup> Since 2008, as per Medvedev's plan, Russia is trying to have a softer approach in the region.

Russia has some military presence in the CARs. It has military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It is also helping the latter two states in their efforts to curb religious terrorism in their lands. As the region is providing transit facilities to the NATO for the "war on terror," Russia also plays a key role in such decision making.<sup>40</sup> Integration is Russia's catchword for stabilizing the region. Putin proposed the "energy club" in 2007. It had two main important points. First, it was to protect the region's main suppliers of energy including Russia. Second, it was to protect the main consumers of that energy i.e. China and India. So, Russia wants to stabilize the region by bringing in other regional powers.<sup>41</sup> Russia has stable ties in Central Asia but not over-arching influence in the presence of China; yet she is able to contain USA with the help of the latter. It has accepted and effectively enhanced the functions and scope of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Its

<sup>36</sup> Marlène Laruelle, "Russia in Central Asia: Old History, New Challenges?," *EUCAM: EU-Central Asia Monitoring*, working no. 3, September 2009, [www.eucentralasia.eu](http://www.eucentralasia.eu).

<sup>37</sup> Andrei Kortunov, *Russia and Central Asia: Evolution of Mutual Perceptions, Policies, Interdependence* (Houston, Texas: Rice University, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Erica Marat, "The SCO and Foreign Powers in Central Asia: Sino-Russian Differences," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, May 28, 2008, [www.cacianalyst.org](http://www.cacianalyst.org).

<sup>39</sup> "Russians Abroad: A Case of Central Asia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 26, 2010, [www.eng.globalaffairs.ru](http://www.eng.globalaffairs.ru).

<sup>40</sup> Raquel Maria Freire, "Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing or Imposing?," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2009): 125-149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 & 37.

own security brand, the Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)<sup>42</sup> are available alternatives.

### **Russian Resurgence and South Asian Region**

Russia's relation with the South Asian region, to test its ability to surge beyond its traditional spheres, is an interesting theme. The more control it has over its traditional spheres, the more resurgent it is over the adjoining regions including South Asia.

It is believed that Russia would not be committing itself tangibly as a hegemon in South Asia in the presence of other major powers such as the USA, China and India, but it would continue to influence the regional dynamics. Consequently, describing Russian relations with the South Asian region would be different from the regions that have been discussed earlier. In the latter regions, it was a relation of the dominant with the subservient; while with the former, the question of Russian hegemony is out of question. During the Cold War, the former Soviet Union had strategic relations with India and Afghanistan, and a short stint with Pakistan. However, after its reformation in 1991, Russia behaves as a rational state, which talks in terms of common interests and profitability. So, supposing a common policy for South Asia is not in sight, a plural policy approach seems to be the real policy of Russia for South Asia.

Russia after its reformation in 1991, has withdrawn from the region. In South Asia, India was the main Soviet ally during the Cold war but the post-cold war South Asia saw a rapid coolness in their mutual relations. Russia feels that India has digressed from the Nehru-course of non-aligned policy. Moreover, instead of working for multi-polarity, India seems to be supporting the US hegemony in the world. What is more troublesome for Russia is the threat that India may be endorsing the US plans to secure the "Greater Central Asia" through external forces. India, on the other side, seems very little attracted to a Russia that is not valuable in terms of technology and economy.<sup>43</sup>

On the other side, the two states never had any history of dispute and hostility. And both want to keep it that way in the future. Putin's Russia since 2000 has endorsed a policy of exhausting multiple channels for gaining more stakes in world affairs.<sup>44</sup> His pragmatism opened up ways for more

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<sup>42</sup> The organization was formed in 2000, having mostly the former Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as its members. It is aimed at to form common economic policies. For details see [www.eurasian-ec.com](http://www.eurasian-ec.com).

<sup>43</sup> "Russia-India: Expecting Positive Changes to Come," *Strategic Culture Foundation* (Online Journal), December 15, 2011, [www.Strategic\\_Culture.org](http://www.Strategic_Culture.org).

<sup>44</sup> Stephen F. Larrabee, "Russia, Ukraine and Central Europe: The Return of Geopolitics," *World Affairs Journal*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010).

engagement with two South Asian rivals, India and Pakistan, simultaneously. It also helped choosing two sets of policies; one bilateral, second as a global player. So, on the one side, Russia supports India on the Line of Control against Islamic terrorism; on the other side, it is now more vocal against Indian nuclear stance and its status as a global power. So, a look at the last decade of Indo-Russian relations indicates that it is more on tangible mutuality and equality of interests.<sup>45</sup> Both the states would like to maintain relations as between two “normal” states, and time to time efforts would be made to ameliorate the negativities in their mutual relations, as they arise.

The post-Cold War Russia has least strategic interests in the wider South Asia. What concerns it most is the volatile area that has come to be called as “Af-Pak.” Central Asia is the area of vital interest to Russia, and Afghanistan is the gateway to it. A stable Afghanistan is the key to keep Central Asia stable. Russia wants to see a coherent and moderate Afghanistan. Because, a Talibanised and disruptive Afghanistan can have a spill-over effect on the Central Asia states, where any “Arab-Spring” type political unrest can weaken the over-all standing of Russia as a world power.<sup>46</sup>

So, on Afghanistan, the US and Russia seem to be on the same page. Russia stood as a cooperative ally to the US on its military mission in Afghanistan. It also provides the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to the NATO supplies. Recently, when there was greater stress on the NATO supplies coming from Pakistan, Russia indicated to cooperate further with the US for its transit needs.<sup>47</sup> So, as far as the “war on terror” is concerned, Russia seems happy with the US efforts in eliminating and pacifying the Taliban and keeping Afghanistan intact.

As far as the long term US influence in the region is concerned, Russia is inclined to support the regional set-ups, like SCO and CSTO, as regional tools. Here, Russia may be looking towards states like India, Afghanistan and Pakistan to be more active members of these organizations in the region, and bring their issues, like terrorism, to these forums.<sup>48</sup> So, while on the one side, there is great power politics of Russia, on the other side, there are the security needs of the smaller states of the region.

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<sup>45</sup> Arabinda Acharya, “Russia’s Agenda for South Asia,” *Centre for Peace and Developmental Studies* (New Delhi), October 2000, [www.cpdindia.org](http://www.cpdindia.org).

<sup>46</sup> Monika Pawar, “Russia’s Afghan Strategy: What are Its Interests?,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (New Delhi), December 28, 2011, [www.ipcs.org](http://www.ipcs.org).

<sup>47</sup> “Russia, NATO Prepare New Afghanistan Transit Deal-Media,” *Strategic Culture Foundation* (Online Journal), February 3, 2012, [www.Strategic\\_Culture.org](http://www.Strategic_Culture.org).

<sup>48</sup> Nikolai Kozyrev, “How the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Can Help Tackle the Afghan Conundrum,” *International Affairs* (Moscow), December 22, 2010, [www.en.interaffairs.ru](http://www.en.interaffairs.ru).

The forecasts for the post-2014 Afghanistan and adjoining areas is not generally positive;<sup>49</sup> Russian stakes in the state are likely to remain high. Its first interest is to see a Taliban-free Afghanistan. If that does not materialize, it at least wants a pacified and localized Taliban in Afghanistan who do not have any international jihadist intentions. Thirdly, in an eventuality of failure of these tactics, it may even be ready to engage in Afghanistan on ethnic lines, as it did during the Taliban era of 1990s. Its relations with other states in the vicinity would be accordingly adjusted as the game in the field changes.

Putin's Russia showed renewed interest in Pakistan. His strategy of opening spaces for Russia had some place for Pakistan. Despite having potentials, the two sides were not able to forge mutual relations on any tangible ground in the past.<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to know what brings the erstwhile Cold War rivals together. It is also helpful to understand the reason for the eagerness with which one side is looking to the other side.

Russia, at the moment, is supporting a series of states that have some strategic troubles with the USA; Syria, Iran and Pakistan. Though more diplomatically and in the UN Security Council resolutions than on ground, help of Russia and China has encouraged these states to maintain their status-quo and be adamant against the US. The enthusiastic policy of "multi-polarity" and "Eurasianism" may bring about some changes in the international politics,<sup>51</sup> but the reduced ability of Russia itself as a viable power may not allow it to "control" the resultant events.

Russian interests in Pakistan mainly revolve around energy and technical investments. Gazprom is present in the negotiations on Iran-Pakistan pipe-line project. Pakistan also has a massive direct impact on Afghanistan and indirect one on Central Asia. Immediately, Russia does not want to offend either Pakistan or USA, as it itself, cannot make for the loss of either. Russia is caught between the short-term objective of restoring stability in Afghanistan and long-term strategic withdrawal of USA from the region. On the former, it is in its interest to find the US and Pakistan together against militants; on the latter, it is in its interest to keep re-assuring Pakistan of its alternative support. So far, Russia has been masterfully achieving its goals.

On the other side, Pakistani policy calculations mostly rest on certain "what ifs" regarding its need for Russia. Pakistan has a sense of betrayal from its donor-ally, the US. Especially, as the "war on terror" in Afghanistan is heading towards a final conclusion, the two sides are not being able to keep

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<sup>49</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, James Traub, Ann Marlowe, and Matthieu Aik, "AfPak 2020: A Symposium," *World Affairs Journal*, (March/April 2011), [www.worldaffairsjournal.org](http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org).

<sup>50</sup> Noor-ul-Haq, ed., "Pakistan-Russia Relations," *IPRI Factfile* (Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Islamabad), June 30, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "The Russian Resurgence in the Middle East," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2007): 19-23.



their policy differences concealed from the public. The image of Pakistan, as a country that has some strategic space or at least a country that is not tough, as claimed by US, on the non-state actors that are playing havoc in the region and the world, is the main irritant for the US side. Especially, the US public opinion, which exercises great influence on its foreign policy makers, is the major pressure behind US inflexibility in dealing with terror and democracy issues with the Pakistani counterparts.

As the US operations in Afghanistan are reaching their end, the fact that certain Taliban are still operative and non-conciliatory, tests the patience of US policy-makers. The US thinks that if Taliban are getting any support, which has nearly been cut off from its global sources, then it is from the Pakistani side. On the other side, they also believe that if any state has the ability to reach the small Taliban remnants in the region, then again, it is Pakistan. That is why one finds a tough US attitude towards Pakistani with regard to Taliban that is meant to show that US wants a more serious Pakistani effort in the end game of Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup>

Pakistan, on the receiving end, has not been showing any clear stance on the “war on terror” and the Afghan end game.<sup>53</sup> Old folk-stories of US betrayal and conspiracy theories of US redrawing the map of Pakistan have all softened the minds of Pakistani policy-elites to respond strongly to US unilateral actions like the killing of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad and the Salala check-post incident. What Pakistan wanted was to get clarity in mind about the intention of the US behind these actions. Whether they were just “incidents” or the operationalisation of any long term policy? What if such incidents are repeated; for example, in the context of Balochistan, which is vulnerable. The US has done nothing to alleviate such apprehensions. And, these apprehensions are driving Pakistan to search for alternatives. Is Russia one?

Pakistan has a long and deep stake in Afghanistan. Keeping friendly governments in Afghanistan has been the top priority of Pakistan’s foreign policy towards that state. The long drawn strategic battle with India has overshadowed Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan. Pakistan may have in some deep corner of its heart the feeling that it is helping the US in presenting Afghanistan to India on a plate. Pakistan needs either a friendly government in Kabul or some friendly Taliban in Afghanistan. But, for its chagrin, the US is not ready to lend an ear to Pakistan’s strategic apprehensions in the region.<sup>54</sup> On the other side, the volume of Indian investment is proportionally

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<sup>52</sup> Aryaman Bhatnagar, “US and Pakistan: Likely American Strategy in 2012,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (New Delhi), January 10, 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Ayesha Siddiq, “Pakistan’s Counterterrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies,” *Washington Quarterly*, (Winter 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Tanvir Ahmed Khan, “A Reality Check,” *Dawn*, January 31, 2012.

increasing with the level of stability in that country. So, should Pakistan be a part of that stability? What if a post-2014 Afghanistan harbours a strong but unfriendly government that blocks all its projects in Central Asia and around? In such a scenario, Russia would be the ultimate circle breaker for Pakistan.

Lastly, the US aid has a political history in Pakistan. This aid has deeply shaped the state perceptions and its institutions.<sup>55</sup> Pakistan has a security perception of itself that is fraught with perils and vulnerabilities. Initially, it was the over-arching presence of its neighbour India with which it had to have a war at the very inception of the statehood, which shaped this security perception. Later on, as the security institutions flourished, this mode of thinking became self-evident and a security culture prevailed among the elite decision makers. Pakistan started to consider its relations with neighbours, singularly, in terms of hard-power. The US military assistance became the very foundation of this culture. Ironically, it is this very assistance that is the biggest stick in the hands of the US to control and direct Pakistan's policies. The Salala type of incident shows the long-held relations between the US and Pakistan are fragile. So, what if the US piles more pressures on the Pakistani military and mars its capabilities in future? Pakistan needs an "easy" partner that fulfils its security needs without intervening in its domestic affairs; Russia can be such an option.

All these facts must be read together to understand the new level of enthusiasm that Pakistan is suddenly finding for Russia. The irony is that both the sides want to use the other for leverage purposes against the same target. Perhaps, Russia is thinking more of using the situation in Af-Pak-Iran as leverage against the USA in the Caucasus and on the issues of Missile Defence Shield (MDS) and East Europe. On the other hand, Pakistan's quest for Russian support, as mentioned earlier, is also US specific. It wants to use Russia, as China seems too cautious a partner in this context, as the leverage here. So, the US-Russia global strategic battle is at the helm of Pak-Russian affairs. But, would that supposed conflict materialize in real terms? Many opinion makers see the contrary prospects and predict more pro-west Russian moves in the future.<sup>56</sup>

So, the best course for both Pakistan and Russia would be to go slow in building a relationship and take their time in case of long-term strategic commitments at this stage. And this is what it seems to be the on-going policy on both sides. As the last couple of sessions of talks and visits indicate, the two sides are talking on "soft" issues only. On Afghanistan, both sides agreed, during the official visit of the Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to Russia in

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<sup>55</sup> Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Press, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Nye, Jr., "The Dialectics of Rise and Decline: Russia in Global Affairs since the End of the Cold War," *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 29, 2011.

May 2011, on three things—stability in Afghanistan, empowerment of Afghani people and development projects in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> Both want to see the withdrawal as an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process.<sup>58</sup> Trade and energy sectors loom high in the February 2012 visit of Pakistani foreign minister to Russia.<sup>59</sup> Media, in both countries, gave proper attention to each other and more space was given to economy than strategic issues.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, the Russian role and involvement in South Asia is country-specific to safeguard its vital economic, political and military interests. By engaging itself in regions like South Asia, Russia would like to bolster the security of its traditional spheres of influence, some of which border with South Asia. Russia may not be as forceful and tangible as the other two players, China and the US are, but it would like to maintain its influence and presence in the region to safeguard its long-term strategic interests. China and Iran are already major anti-American regional allies of Russia, and if some of the South Asian states like Afghanistan, Pakistan and India are courted, the resurgent Russia would be able to edge out the Western influence in its immediate neighbourhood.

## Conclusion

Russian resurgence is based on nostalgic history, strong geopolitics, military modernization, fast economic recovery, political stability and international diplomatic clout. Despite its shrinking role, Russia is the only country which has credible nuclear deterrence against the United States. Its opposition to the US invasions, protection of its immediate areas of political sphere and resistance against western moves on Iran and Syria, speak about its re-emerging role in the global arena. The continuity of national leadership and its politico-economic and military policies also depict a strong resolve by the political elite to its growing role in the international strategic environment. Russia is also building regional and extra-regional formal and informal alliances like CSTO, EurAsEc, Iran-China-Russia and BRICS, to enhance its global reach.

Russia would like to maintain its political and military control over its traditional areas of influence i.e., the Baltics, Caucasus and Central Asia, and any external move to undermine its role will be resisted forcefully. In order to

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<sup>57</sup> Andrei Volodin “Indian Subcontinent and Eurasia’s Security,” *Strategic Culture Foundation* (Online Journal), June 8, 2011, [www.strategic-culture.org](http://www.strategic-culture.org).

<sup>58</sup> “Working Together: Pakistan, Russia Vow to Support Afghan Peace Initiative,” *Express Tribune*, February 9, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> “Pakistan, Russia Agree on Reconciliation in Afghanistan,” *Pakistan Today*, February 9, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> “Economy and Regional Politics,” Editorial, *Daily Times*, February 10, 2012.

protect these regions, Russia is also enhancing its presence and influence in other areas, especially South Asia.

In South Asia, Russian renewed interest is focused on politico-economics of the region in the wake of US exit from Afghanistan, keeping intact its relations with India despite the growing US presence there, but more importantly, on the signs of waning US role in Pakistan and Pakistani energy needs. In the recent political and diplomatic stand-off between the US and Pakistan, Russia was seen as a counter-weight. It would like to build on its growing influence in Pakistan probably or possibly in areas from which US interests seem to be receding. However, Russia would not be influencing the regional dynamics forcefully in the presence of other strong regional contenders like China. Nonetheless, Russia in order to secure its traditional spheres of influence, would like to keep its presence in South Asia intact for the long-term strategic opportunities. ■