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President Vladimir Putin embarks on his two-day visit to India tomorrow. Beyond stepping up the strategic partnership through a possible signing of the \$5.4 billion S-400 Triumf Air Defence Missile Systems deal, the visit has larger geopolitical ramifications for Russia. In the regional context, Russia's aims can be reflected in the fears recently expressed by the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister of the "US-Russia confrontation (in Ukraine) moving towards Afghanistan". As domestic issues raise their head, Putin could be looking towards India for more robust foreign policy outcomes.

Set to overtake Syria as the deadliest conflict this year, Afghanistan is pivotal to the evolving re-alignments in its immediate neighbourhood. The escalating violence and the increasing divergence of the US and Pakistan's approaches to the Afghan endgame serve as immediate catalysts, remodelling regional alliances within the framework of the Great Power conflict. Afghanistan is fast emerging as the theatre for strategic balancing as various powers jockey for influence and equilibrium while a new Great Game gets underway.

The US's 2014 drawdown left a power vacuum in the volatile region, increasingly filled by China with the bait of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Aimed at expanding its strategic footprint alongside its economic clout, the initiative posed direct challenges to US interests. The US's plummeting relationship with Pakistan exacerbated the situation. The \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor sealed the Chinese foothold. As a means to counter the expanding Chinese influence, the US sought to leverage its growing proximity with India. This drew Russia, the other major player in the region, into the fray. Fearing the spillover of Afghan instability to Central Asia, along with the closeness of its erstwhile strategic partner India to the US, Russia injected a new dynamic to the shifting calculus.

As a power seeking to reclaim its lost grandeur, the changing regional equations offered Russia a unique opportunity to gain symbolic ground while securing its diplomatic, security and economic interests. As a player in the Afghan conundrum, Russia could position itself as a stabilising force. It has elevated its diplomatic stature by pursuing peace-building efforts through multilateral conferences and reviving the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Contact Group on Afghanistan. It also tried to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and sought to re-brand itself as a "noble investor", pouring millions into Afghanistan's infrastructure, transport and mining sectors. Its arms donation (2016) to the Afghan Military along with training imparted to its officials and supply of military hardware aimed at enhancing Moscow's standing in the region, while dispelling notions of support to the Taliban.

From a security perspective, Afghanistan neatly braids both challenges and opportunities for Russia. The expanding ISIS presence in Afghanistan has produced much anxiety. Russia's foreign ministry in 2016 claimed "unidentified helicopters" were resupplying ISIS fighters, implying links with US forces. As a response, it opted to back the Taliban to undercut the ISIS. This also fits with Russia's larger geopolitical aim of pushing the US back. That's also where Pakistan comes in. Both Russia and Pakistan see US interests in Afghanistan as inimical to their own. They also see the Taliban as a convenient panacea to their security fears. Iran, another regional player having allied with Russia in Syria and Iraq, also joined the support for the Taliban.

The firming of alliances in the backdrop of converging strategic interests in Afghanistan also allows Russia the much-needed diversification of its markets, especially as exports to Europe slump. Energy-starved Pakistan provides ample opportunity — such as the \$2 billion agreement on the North-South gas pipeline (Karachi to Lahore). While India, the largest procurer of Russian arms, shifts to US and French deals, Russia has signed a defence cooperation agreement with Pakistan (2014), lifting an arms embargo and finalising the sales of Mi-35 combat helicopters, Russian engines for Pakistan's indigenous JF-17 fighter jets. It is also in talks for the sale of SU-35 fighter jets and T-90 tanks. The CPEC provides Russia a further opportunity to link its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with South Asia, the Indian Ocean and beyond.

A meeting of the spy chiefs of Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran in Islamabad earlier this year reflected the shifting strategic compass in Afghanistan. As the Trump Administration continues to antagonise allies and its 2017 Mission Expansion in Afghanistan fails to deliver, the alternate grouping could find greater manoeuvrability. Both China and Russia are averse to air-tight alliances, yet the convergence of strategic interests could shape a new regional architecture. New Delhi will need to perfect its tightrope-walking skills.

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