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By Dr. Subhash Kapila

Russia's Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific as declared by President Putin in September 2012 at the APEC Meeting in Vladivostok was analysed by me in SAAG Paper no 5452 dated 08 April 2013. It was pointed out then that "Russia's strategic pivot to Asia Pacific undoubtedly will prove a strategic game-changer both in terms of its timing and its underlying intent".

In September 2013 a year after the declaration of Russia's Strategic Pivot to Asia no firm indicators have surfaced in terms of Russia emerging as a game-changer in the Asia Pacific. This logically leads one to question Russia's strategic choices in the Asia Pacific and the strategic path that Russia intends to follow in this volatile region.

Russia could not have missed the fact that ever since the events of 2008-2009 with China's military escalation of the South China Sea conflicts with Vietnam and the Philippines and later over the East China Sea conflicts with Japan, China's strategic image has taken a big dent.

China is no longer perceived as a responsible stakeholder in Asia Pacific peace and security. On the contrary a firm belief that is getting rooted in Asia capitals is that the 'China Threat' is a growing reality and the Asia Pacific would be well advised to factor this eventuality in their strategic planning.

Against this contextual backdrop the recent Joint Naval Exercises between China and Russia which for the first time involved actual operational doctrines has evoked strategic concerns in the Asia Pacific as to the directions in which Russia is moving. Even if these joint Russo-China naval exercises were America-centric, that is not a convincing factor in Asian capitals. What counts in Asian capitals that

Russia through such advanced naval exercises is up-grading the combat capabilities of the Chinese Navy which is involved in military coercion and aggression against Asian countries in China's numerous maritime sovereignty disputes in the Asia Pacific.

This goes against the grain of strategic thinking that Russia was keen to strike an independent path and postures in the Asia Pacific power-play befitting its earlier status as the strategic co-equal of the United States and its resurgence to re-acquire it.

In the field of international relations and power-play, perceptions count. Can Russia afford to let the picture go around that it is reinforcing its alliance with China which the rest of the Asia Pacific counts as the 'China Threat'?

Russia's strategic alignment with China is also costing it heavily in terms of its relationships with three major countries of the Asia Pacific, namely, India, Japan and Vietnam.

China is involved in long-standing territorial disputes with all these three important Asia Pacific countries which matter in the Asian security calculus. Can Russia afford to ignore that its standing is being strongly affected by its strategic alignment with China.

Russia's foreign policy imperatives would suggest that in the pursuance of its Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific, the same cannot be furthered by China alone. Russia would need to leverage its long standing strategic ties with India and Vietnam. Russia would need to resuscitate its ties with India and Vietnam which stood rusted because of Russia's 'China Connection'.

In the same vein, Russia has to make newer openings to Japan which gradually is shedding its pacifist cloaks and is moving towards acquiring a self-reliant independent defence capability forced by China's aggressive stances towards Japan. Russia's even token accommodative stances on its Northern Islands dispute with Japan could open up promising opportunities in Russo-Japan relations.

Russia to shoulder strategic responsibilities of an independent power centre in the Asia Pacific needs to adopt forthright stands on the South China Sea conflicts and also on the East China Sea disputes. Russian silence on Asia Pacific's maritime sovereignty disputes denotes its complicity with China. Can Russia afford to let such an impression go around?

Finally, Russia's Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific declaration would be meaningless unless it adds muscle to its force deployments in its Far Eastern Region with a bearing on fast-track deployments in the Asia Pacific. Then only its emergence as a countervailing power in the Asia Pacific would become credible.

Coming to the question of Russian countervailing power in the Asia Pacific what needs to be examined from the point of view of Asia Pacific nations security concerns is what Russian countervailing power needs to be and directed against whom?

Russia's Strategic Pivot to Asia Pacific would be meaningless unless Russian countervailing power is not used to checkmate China's

unchecked propensity to use military force and coercion to settle in its favour its territorial disputes with its Asian neighbours.

Russian strategic dilemma on this count is appreciable but so also needs to be appreciated Asian perceptions of China. For them the 'China Threat' exists in real terms and Russian reinforcement of military ties with China through the medium of large scale operations-oriented exercises even if they are America-centric in intent do not improve Russia's image and standing in the Asia Pacific.

The stark strategic choice that awaits Russia in the Asia Pacific region is whether it can change directions in its policy formulations on China. Russia cannot ignore 'Strategic Swings' of China in favour of the United States targeting Russia which forms part of recent historical records. Similarly Russia cannot ignore its own record of an Atlanticist swing in the Yeltsin years when its Foreign Minister declared that Russia is a 'natural ally' of the West.

Russia's strategic future can be secured neither by an unreliable China alignment or a swing to the West. On both counts, this runs counter to Russia's foreign policy declaration of emerging as an 'independent power centre'.

Russia's foreign policy future can only become credible should it choose to rebuild its strategic ties with India and Vietnam and makes dramatic strategic openings to Japan. For that Russia has to shed its 'China Baggage'.

Is Russia ready for this change?

(Dr. Subhash Kapila is the Consultant, International Relations & Strategic Affairs, South Asia Analysis Group. He can be reached at drsubhashkapila.007@gmail.com [1])

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