

Kashmir and the US-Russia Power Play in South Asia

Trump's Playing the Role of South Asian "Balancer" Since Putin Doesn't Want to

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Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Russia is reluctant to jeopardize its ultra-profitable arms relationship with India by strategically "balancing" South Asia, which is why the US decided to play this irreplaceable role instead by actively seeking to cut deals in both Afghanistan and Kashmir since Moscow lacks the political will to do so.

South Asia's "Deal Of The Century"

The state of play in South Asia was revolutionized by India's ["Israeli"-like](#) unilateral move earlier this month to de-facto annex the half of Kashmir that it was occupying, which was veritably a game-changer in regional affairs but runs the risk of becoming the [strategic blunder](#) that Pakistani Prime Minister Khan warned about. India thought that it would get a head-start on its ["Israeli" ally's](#) so-called "Deal of the Century" by imposing its own variant of this in its home region ahead of time, encouraged as it was by the silence of most Arab countries to the seemingly impending sell-out of Palestine and the signal that the US has been sending that it'll encourage such steps to resolve long-standing "frozen conflicts" so long as they're accompanied by impressive investments in those areas. It was with that in mind that India centralized its control of Kashmir and removed any pretense of relative "autonomy", arguing that it was doing so in order to bring ["development"](#) to the disputed territory that it promised would assuredly arrive after a [forthcoming investors summit](#) later this year.

Russia & America Reverse Roles

At first, it seemed like everything was going according to plan. Pakistan [ruled out](#) a military option to India's move, and the international reaction was comparatively mild. China brought the issue to the UNSC in a closed-door meeting, but while this succeeded in drawing a lot of attention to Kashmir and was hugely symbolic, it failed to achieve anything tangible. In fact, if anything, China's efforts also somewhat worked out to India's favor since they provoked Russia to reaffirm its stance that Kashmir is a bilateral issue and therefore highlighted the [first serious disagreement](#) between Moscow and Beijing in the [New Cold War](#). Russia was therefore forced to forfeit its efforts to ["balance"](#) regional affairs through its recent ["Return to South Asia"](#) after it chose its immediate economic interests with India (via their ultra-profitable arms relationship) over its long-term strategic one of replacing America's role in this part of the world just like it successfully did in the Mideast over the past few years. This decision didn't go unnoticed by the US, which quickly took advantage of its rival's shortsightedness to fill the irreplaceable role of regional "balancer" that's the need of the moment.

Trump Slaps India Twice In A Single Day

Trump shocked India twice in a single day by reminding reporters that he's still interested in mediating the [Kashmir Conflict](#) between it and Pakistan, even going as far as to endorse the two-nation theory that would have naturally led to the region's incorporation into Pakistan had it been followed to a tee by [adding](#) that *"You have Hindus and you have the Muslims and I wouldn't say they get along so great."* Trump also expressed his frustration at the US sacrificing its soldiers to serve Indian strategic goals in Afghanistan by [complaining](#) that "Look, India is right there. They are not fighting it. We are fighting it", which confirms exactly what the author wrote about earlier this year in his analysis about ["Reading Between The Lines: India Has Sour Grapes Over America's Afghan Peace Talks"](#). To be fair, Trump continued by saying that Pakistan, Russia, Afghanistan (presumably the Kabul government in this context), Iran, Iraq, and Turkey should also get more involved in fighting terrorism there too, but it's his remark about India that stood out and stung the most.

Playing "Hardball" With The Hindutvadis

This seemingly inexplicable development caught many by surprise but should have been foreseeable since the author has been arguing over the entire summer that the US and India are playing ["hardball"](#) with one another in a high-stakes gamble intended to take advantage of their new "ally". Predictably, as the author wrote, ["India's Finding Out The Hard Way That It Isn't America's Exclusive Ally"](#) after the US decided to go ahead with a \$125 million F-16 deal with Pakistan despite India's loud objections following Prime Minister Khan's [very successful summit](#) with Trump last month, which [Modi had nobody to blame for but himself](#). India [overestimated its strategic importance](#) and ignored the fact that Pakistan is the [global pivot state](#), the latter of which evidently wasn't lost on the US, which appreciates the role that Islamabad plays in this trans-regional space and is why Washington decided to send such mixed signals to New Delhi the other day. To the US' credit, it has the political will to "balance" the region in a tangible way, unlike Russia.

Russia's "Deep State" Divisions

Despite Russia's best intentions in wanting to play this role, it ultimately wasn't able to do so owing to both the comparatively disproportionate significance that arms sales to India have for the national budget and the influence that its partner's ["agents of influence" have on its "deep state"](#). The military-intelligence faction of Moscow's permanent bureaucracy understands the strategic dangers of [New Delhi's pro-American pivot](#) in recent years and the need to "balance" regional affairs by strengthening ties with Islamabad in response, though its diplomats are generally pro-Indian owing to the lasting legacy of the Soviet period, and it's they who had the final say when it came to determining the country's stance towards Kashmir at the UNSC. Afterwards, the more pragmatic/neutral military-intelligence faction was compelled to follow the diplomats' lead once the die was cast and Russia came out in partisan support of India on this issue. As such, it therefore wasn't surprising that Russian National Security Advisor Patrushev told his Indian counterpart Doval earlier this week that Moscow supports New Delhi's ["territorial integrity"](#), which is code for recognizing its moves in Kashmir.

Concluding Thoughts

With the diplomatic and military-intelligence factions of the Russian "deep state" both taking India's side on Kashmir now, it's much more difficult for Moscow to regain its

credibility as a neutral actor in the region and return to trying to “balance” South Asian affairs. The US, however, wisely retained its strategic flexibility and was quickly able to replace Russia’s lost role, as seen by the game of increasingly intense “hardball” that it’s now playing with India, which reminds some of the “do more” mantra that it used to rely on for pressuring Pakistan. The difference, though, is that it’s now India that’s on the receiving end of the American stick while Pakistan’s eating all the carrots after the US realized how irreplaceably important Islamabad is for ensuring regional stability due to its dual stakes in both Afghanistan and Kashmir, to say nothing of its position vis-a-vis Chinese grand strategy in securing Beijing’s only reliable non-Malacca access route to the Afro-Asian (“Indian”) Ocean via [CPEC](#). In hindsight, it all makes sense, both why Russia abandoned its regional “balancing” strategy and why the US rushed in to replace it, thus making South Asia the latest battleground in the New Cold War.

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