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Issue Brief

Renaissance of Pakistan-Russia Relations

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Pakistan and Russia held their first-ever consultation on regional issues on Wednesday, December 14, 2016 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in Islamabad.¹ During the consultations, a wide range of regional issues as well as key areas of mutual interest, including economic cooperation and connectivity were discussed. This is yet another sign of warming relations following lingering Cold War antagonism.

Historically, the relationship between Islamabad and Moscow was treated as a function of latter's relationship with two states, the United States and India. The Cold War further increased the gap between Pakistan and Soviet Union as the former aligned itself with the American block, while India leaned towards USSR (although India maintained its stance as a Non-Aligned state). Meanwhile, Soviet Union's relationship with China also took a turn towards the worse in 1969,² while Pakistan found an ally in Beijing. For most part of their mutual political history, Pakistan and USSR found themselves to be on the opposite sides of the table.

The Soviet-Pakistani relationship sank to its deepest low during the war that the Soviet Union waged in Afghanistan from 1979-1989. At the time, Pakistan was the principal base for the Afghan resistance to Soviet forces. Seen from Moscow, Pakistan was the enemy's backer, resource base and sanctuary.³ The relationship between Pakistan and the Soviet Union has started to improve slowly and gradually since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In 2003, the then President of Pakistan General Musharraf paid an official visit to Moscow which acted as the ice-breaker between the two countries.⁴ This was the first visit by a Pakistan leader to Russia in 30 years. Since then, the tides have turned for the better in Pak-Russian bilateral relations. Numerous steps have been taken over the last decade by the leaders and governments of both the countries for confidence building and to strengthen their relationship such as:

- High level talks on militancy and nuclear proliferation between Pakistan and Russia in 2011.⁵
- Russian Air Chief's visit to Pakistan in April 2013.⁶

¹ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1302291>

² <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/soviet-union-and-chinese-armed-forces-clash>

³ <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/7933/global-insider-russia-pakistan-relations>

⁴ <http://www.dawn.com/news/81020>

⁵ <http://www.dawn.com/news/601186>

⁶ <http://www.brecorder.com/top-news/pakistan/285812-pakistan-russia-relations-enter-in-new-phase-of-friendship-na-told.html>

- Russian Naval Chief's historic visit to Pakistan in 2014.⁷
- A landmark Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed between the two countries during Russian Defence Minister's visit to Pakistan in November 2014.⁸
- Russia lifting up the arms embargo on Pakistan in 2014.⁹
- Visit of Pakistan's Army Chief to Moscow for crucial talks in 2015.¹⁰
- Russian Spy chief's visit to Pakistan in November 2016 to discuss intelligence sharing and anti-terrorism joint ventures.¹¹
- Visit of Pakistan Navy's frigate Alangir to the Russian port of Novorossiysk as a goodwill gesture.¹²
- The arrival of Russian special forces troops in Pakistan for joint military exercises in September 2016..¹³

Apart from the above mentioned steps taken by both the countries to improve bilateral relations, there were several other notable steps that helped solidify confidence, will and desire of both the states for enhancing relations with each other. Russia supported and welcomed Pakistan's entry into the Shanghai Corporation Organisation (SCO).¹⁴ Pakistan showed keen interest in expanding its technical and military cooperation with Russia in a bid to diversify its military arsenal and enhance its defence capabilities (an interest displayed by Pakistan via participating in the Kubinka military expo in September 2016).¹⁵ Russia's assurance to stand by Pakistan in its fight against terrorism is also a very commendable step taken by Moscow.¹⁶ An agreement to construct Lahore-Karachi LNG pipeline was also penned down in 2015 by the governments of Pakistan and Russia to further bolster cooperation in development sector.¹⁷

⁷ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1126966>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1110131>

¹⁰ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/904003/army-chief-arrives-in-russia-for-crucial-talks-ispr/>

¹¹ <https://timesofislamabad.com/57224-2/2016/11/26/>

¹² <https://sputniknews.com/military/201612021048098128-pakistan-navy-frigate/>

¹³ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1285633>

¹⁴ <http://tass.com/world/770938>

¹⁵ <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201609061045009123-pakistan-russia-army-defense/>

¹⁶ <http://tribune.com.pk/story/905232/russia-stands-with-pakistan-in-fight-against-extremism-army-chief-told/>

¹⁷ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>

The recent Russian display of interest in joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) guarantee that Russia is ready for a long-term engagement with Pakistan.¹⁸ Pakistan on the other hand is ready to welcome any regional country including Russia to become a part of CPEC project and reap the fruits of this game changing endeavour which would not only help change the destiny of regional states, but also aid in complementing international trade and cooperation around the world. Apart from that, Pakistan, after analyzing the results of the first joint exercises and finding them to be very successful, sent a request to the Russian Defense Ministry with a proposal to coordinate a plan of events for 2017, which will include a series of joint exercises, exchange of observers and visits of high-ranking officials.¹⁹

The world is witnessing a new dawn in Pakistan-Russia relations. Ignoring Pakistan is no longer an option for Russia. Pakistan is a nuclear power, an emerging economy with a population larger than that of Russia. It can prove to be a good strategic partner in South Asia and provide easy and affordable access to the warm waters of the south (an access Russia has always desired). Pakistan and Russia share security interests of similar nature. Both the states share multiple bilateral and multilateral forums where they voice their concerns. For above mentioned reasons it is imperative for Pakistan and Russia to work in closer cooperation. But despite their will and desire to build better relations, there are obstacles to closer cooperation and Pakistan should be well cognisant of them.

In the realm of international relations, there are no permanent friends and no permanent foes and for this reason Pakistan should work towards building good relations with Russia but Pakistan should also remain aware of political and geostrategic limitations of Russia. Pakistan should remain optimistic about improving Pak-Russian relations but should not over-estimate the amicable gestures by Russia.

Moscow does not want to provoke India. The former is treading its way very cautiously towards Pakistan. Russia is playing its cards extremely carefully as it does not want to invoke India's suspicions and apprehensions as New Delhi is already slipping away towards the US. A history of conflict exists between Pakistan and Russia. There is a trust deficit between the two states and rushing into things could backfire. Security concerns and dominant Chinese factor also make Russian companies and businesses reluctant to do business in Pakistan. Political and security interests of Pakistan and Russia on different forums also clash (such as Russian opposition to Pakistan's entry into the NSG and Pakistan's

¹⁸ <http://nation.com.pk/international/19-Dec-2016/india-tense-as-russia-supports-cpec>

¹⁹ <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610271046779685-russia-pakistan-drills/>

opposition to the creation of new permanent seats at the United Nations Security Council) which hampers with the pace of improving bilateral relations between the two countries.

This does not mean Moscow is hostile toward Islamabad. Nevertheless, Russia still treats its ties with India as an absolute priority, and Moscow has yet to figure out how to deal with Pakistan without spoiling the relationship with New Delhi. However, there are multiple significant steps that can be taken by Pakistan and Russia to improve bilateral relations:

- Russia lacks a cohesive South Asia strategy. It should formulate a well articulated and an **integrated Russian policy on South Asia**. It should avoid country specific agendas (as it breeds animosity amongst different rival states, case and point India and Pakistan). Russia should have an overarching regional strategy as it would help improve region's economic and overall security environment but also help Russia improve its stature amongst regional states.
- Pakistani and Russian security interests are increasingly intertwined, so Moscow cannot afford to ignore Pakistan. Both states should work in close cooperation to address newly emerging threats in the region.
- Officials from Pakistan and Russia should engage in bilateral dialogue before participating in various bilateral and multilateral forums to address their shared security concerns as it would lead to a better understanding of each others' positions on matters and aid in bringing the parties on the same page.
- **Intensive Russian-Pakistani dialogue should be promoted.** Discussion between members of civil, military, and economic institutions in both countries will help further endeavours to deepen cooperation on a range of issues.
- **Enhance existing contacts between officials.** Increasing ties between representatives of the Russian and Pakistani power structures will build trust, promote transparency, and boost confidence in the developing relationship.
- **Help Pakistan respond to security threats on its territory.** Providing political, economic, and military support will help Islamabad address security issues before they threaten Moscow. This assistance should not alter the regional balance of power or provoke India.

Reach out to the Pakistani public. Informing the Pakistani audience of Russian positions and projects in South Asia will help Moscow build trust with regional countries and make its policy more transparent and predictable.²⁰

²⁰ <http://carnegie.ru/2014/05/20/russia-and-pakistan-shared-challenges-and-common-opportunities-pub-55849>