



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Re-shift in Russian Policy Towards Pakistan: Balancing the Unbalanced

Uroosa Khan, Young ISSI Professional*

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* Uroosa Khan has done her BS (honours) in English literature and Linguistics from National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad in 2017. Currently she is working under young professional Corner at the ISSI. Her areas of research include Russia, Central Asia and Middle East.

The cold war grievances of Russia and Pakistan have come to a halt and both the countries are actively strengthening their economic, military and diplomatic ties. The revival of this cooperation began in 2014 when Moscow lifted its arms embargo against Islamabad, which was followed by a series of meetings and signature of a military pact as well. Russia has also been supporting Pakistan diplomatically. As part of bolstering bilateral ties, Islamabad and Moscow are also cooperating in the energy and agriculture sectors. Along with the growing warmth towards Pakistan, it can also be noticed that Russia is also keen on developing its bilateral relations with Pakistan.

On July 10, 2015, Prime Nawaz Sharif in a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the SCO Summit said that “We want a multi-dimensional relationship with Russia in the fields of trade, defense, energy, infrastructure, culture and other spheres.”¹



On November 20, 2014 Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shogyu signed an agreement on military cooperation with Pakistan for which Russia has shown a positive response.² Thus, the very first joint Russian-Pakistani tactical exercises “Druzhba-2016” were held in Cherat, Pakistan in October 2016.³ Another joint drill between the two countries is expected this year.⁴ Apart from this, in 2016,

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1193608>

² n.rbth.com/blogs/south_asian_outlook/2017/01/16/where-does-pakistan-fit-in-russias-south-asia-strategy_681726

³ <https://www.rt.com/news/360873-russia-pakistan-military-drills/>

Pakistan also ordered an initial series of Mi-35 Hind E helicopters from Russia and various other reports suggested that Pakistan is also engaged with Russia in talks for the purchase of Su 35 combat aircraft, Su-37 fighter jets and even the air defense systems.⁵ This selling and buying of advanced military equipment and the joint military drills of Russo-Pak soldiers point to a prominent shift in Russian policy towards Pakistan.

After a decade of strained relations, Pakistan and Russia are now cautiously trying to improve their interaction. With great caution, Russia and Pakistan are also engaging in energy/infrastructure projects like North-South gas pipeline and CASA1000. North-South Gas Pipeline, a 2 billion dollar project, was signed on October 16, 2015 by Pakistan petroleum minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Russia's energy minister Mr. Alexander V. Novak.⁶ This gas pipeline will help to transport gas from Karachi in Southern Sindh to Lahore in the central Punjab province. It will also help to alleviate shortages in the northern parts of country. North-South gas pipeline will also have an additional capacity of transporting LNG from Karachi which Pakistan currently, has to import from Qatar to meet shortages. This project will also generate orders for Russian industrial enterprises and will also open up a new market for Russian companies in Pakistan. Pakistan has also invited Russia to join CASA-1000⁷ for the transmission of thermal energy, to which the Russian government has agreed upon. Moreover, both the countries are also conferring on the 600Mw gas-fired power plant in Jamshoro⁸ to be built with Russian investment. Cooperation under these projects will further enhance Russia-Pakistan relationship

Along with these, military cooperation between the two countries is the most significant partnership seen in the recent past. Pakistan defense enterprises are also expected to participate in the Army 2017 military expo in Russia.⁹

Alarmed by these turn of events, on October 7, 2016 India's ambassador to Russia Pankaj Saran said that, "We have conveyed our views to the Russian side that military cooperation with Pakistan, which is a state that sponsors and practices terrorism as a matter of state policy, is a wrong approach. It will only

⁴ <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610271046779685-russia-pakistan-drills/>

⁵ <http://carnegie.ru/2017/01/16/where-does-pakistan-fit-in-russia-s-south-asia-strategy-pub-67696>

⁶ <https://pabausa.org/791/pakistan-russia-ink-agreement-on-2-billion-north-south-gas-pipeline/>

⁷ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1288247>

⁸ www.dawn.com/news/1288247

⁹ <https://defence.pk/>...>Pakistan-Defence&Industry>

create further problems.”¹⁰ However, Russia has remained very neutral on this issue and ignored all such statements.

Although Russian policy towards Pakistan had been ambiguous, however, the recent series of collaborations showcase a favorable tilt of deep and long-term interest of Russia towards Pakistan. Apart from military cooperation, Pakistan and Russia are also expanding bilateral cooperation on energy and infrastructure projects. Pakistan has taken the first step by offering Russia the use of Gwadar port which would help Russia to connect it to the rest of the world.¹¹ It is expected that Moscow will use this port for exports and imports. Russia has also shown interest in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹² Furthermore, Russia has also joined hands with Pakistan to counter terrorism. Russian Ambassador to Pakistan Alexy Y. Dedov has said that Russia will assist Pakistan in fighting terrorism by supplying military equipment.¹³

Furthermore, the disturbing conditions in Afghanistan have also brought Russia closer to Pakistan. Russia is focusing on the peace and security of Afghanistan.¹⁴ Also, Russia will host another wider regional peace conference on Afghanistan on April 14, 2017¹⁵ and has invited Pakistan, Iran, India, several Central Asian States and also United States of America. Russia fears that Afghanistan might become a stronghold for the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) militant group after Iraq and Syria.¹⁶ With regard to the current regional security environment, Russia has also lauded Pakistan army’s military operation ‘Raddul Fasad.’¹⁷

This sudden interest of Russia in Afghanistan to some extent is quite surprising for various nations like US. However, the disorder in Kabul has direct effects on Russia and it leads to a surge in terrorism there as well. On the other hand, Pakistan, with the backing of China, has to play a role in peace process in Afghanistan. So, stability in Afghanistan is a common area of interest for both Pakistan and Russia.

The new emerging axis which can be witnessed is that of China, Russia and Pakistan. China is Pakistan’s traditional and strongest ally - a fact Russia knows quite well. Furthermore, China has also encouraged

¹⁰ <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/deep-military-cooperation-between-russia-and-pakistan-threatens-delhi>

¹¹ www.ndtv.com › World

¹² www.valuewalk.com/2016/11/uk-france-russia-join-pakistan-china-cpec/

¹³ www.dawn.com/news/1302890

¹⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/af71faae-b7bd-11e6-961e-a1acd97f622d>

¹⁵ <http://www.asianews.af/en/13608/>

¹⁶ <http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-russia-so-interested-in-afghanistan-all-of-a-sudden/a-36989680>

¹⁷ <http://paksoldiers.com/2017/02/28/russia-applauds-pakistan-armys-operation-radd-ul-fassad/>

the growing Russo-Pak relations. Although, both the countries are vigilant in developing their relations, it has not been a relation of disappointment. India and US are bolstering their defense and trade as well. But the way Russia is favoring Pakistan and vice versa, it is quite evident that this bond is on the basis of mutual benefit and also, equality. Iran has also hinted of becoming part of this China-Pakistan-Russia alliance.¹⁸ Iran's Parliament committee on national security and foreign policy said on January 27, 2017 that Iran wants to join Pakistan-China-Russia alliance for regional security and stability.¹⁹

All the recent engagements and associations between Pakistan and Russia show the direction and future of their relations. By not standing up for India at the BRICS summit held on October 16-17, 2016, Russia has made it clear that it will be developing its relations with Pakistan on its own terms.

So far, there are a number of reasons Russia would want to have a long-term bond with Pakistan. Russia considers Gwadar a great opportunity. It needs effective access to Arabian and Indian Ocean. And, if Russia becomes part of CPEC by linking Kasghar through road or rail, it will enjoy the same benefits as China. This it can only acquire through Pakistan. Apart from this, if Gwadar port transforms into a naval base, Russia will utilize this alliance to deter US navy. Russia and China also share common enemies, and in order to secure their existence, Russia is looking forward for a long-term cooperation with Pakistan and China. Also, Russia sees a massive market in South Asia for selling its arms. And for this, Russia is looking towards three Muslim countries: Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Russia wants to have stronger ties with China and Iran as well. And for that purpose, Pakistan is the key. Cooperation between Russia and Pakistan can be made even much stronger and can bring more harmony between the two countries by establishing more projects and enhancing people to people contacts in various sectors. Further cooperation in the field of energy and infrastructure will help Pakistan to revive its industrial sector. In short, this will be a profitable cooperation for both the countries in setting up a mutually beneficial roadmap for bilateral relations.

¹⁸ todayinpakistan.com/iran-join-china-pakistan-russia-alliance

¹⁹ <http://www.radio.gov.pk/28-Jan-2017/for-regional-security-and-stability-iran-hints-at-joining-pakistan-russia-china-alliance>