

Prospects for Russia-Pakistan Rapprochement

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Abstract

Russia and Pakistan have rarely enjoyed cordial relations in the past. However, in the recent years, the two countries have undertaken some important initiatives to normalise their relations that encompass economic, political as well as military dimensions. The article analyses this developing thaw in Russia-Pakistan relations and assesses its future trajectory in the context of what can be arguably termed as an evolving post-9/11 regional scenario.

Keywords: Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, China, Central Asia, CPEC, ISIS.

Introduction

Russia-Pakistan bilateral relations have witnessed some important transformations in the recent past. The two countries are now regularly talking to each other on almost all aspects of inter-state relations including military-to-military contacts. Far from the rhetoric of the past, President Putin has even remarked that his government views Pakistan as a reliable and very important partner.¹ What factors are contributing to this unprecedented change in this relationship, and what opportunities and constraints shape this process? This article focuses on these questions and aims at presenting an analysis of evolving warmth in Russia-Pakistan bilateral relationship. It is divided into four broad sections. The first section deals with the historical evolution of Russia-Pakistan relations. The second section takes stock of the increasing warmth in their bilateral relations in the recent years. The next section analyses the changing dynamics of Russia-Pakistan relations in the

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¹ Harsh V. Pant, "Changes in Region Push Pakistan and Russia Together," *National*, October 29, 2012, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/changes-in-region-push-pakistan-and-russia-together>

recent years. This is then followed by the concluding remarks which particularly deal with the nature of this growing thaw and its future trajectory.

Cold Past

Russia-Pakistan relations are heavily influenced by their Cold War past. Soon after independence, the bipolar global politics forced Pakistan to choose either the United States (US) or the Soviet Union (Russia's predecessor) as its ally as it faced an existential security threat from the neighbouring country India. As Pakistan chose, Washington as its preferred partner, its relations with Moscow naturally 'got off to a cool start.'² With the passage of time, Pakistan increasingly got sucked into the US-led anti-communist alliances namely Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), and any overtures by its leadership towards Moscow in the subsequent years, aimed at seeking a normal relationship, remained mostly fruitless.³

This divide was further widened, when New Delhi developed a closer relationship with the Soviet Union soon after its independence. The Indo-Soviet relationship flourished in the subsequent years, encompassing the economic as well as political dimensions, and soon New Delhi attained a sort of veto power over Russia's independent manoeuvrings in the region. India emerged as the major buyer of the Soviet arms. For the first time in February 1957, Russia used its veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in favour of India to bar a resolution on Kashmir, putting a permanent blockade on any progress on the Kashmir dispute in the UNSC and, hence, any chances of friendly Soviet-Pakistan relations.

China emerged as another factor in the Russia-Pakistan divergence during the Cold War. This occurred in the context of development of Sino-Pakistan entente in the wake of deteriorating Sino-Indian and Sino-Soviet relations during the 1960s. In the wake of the Indo-Pakistan rift,

² S. M. Burke and Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98.

³ For historical overview of Russia-Pakistan relations see, Hafeez Malik, *Soviet-Pakistan Relations and Post-Soviet Dynamics 1947-92* (London: Macmillan Press, 1994).

Beijing naturally viewed Pakistan as a valuable partner, when China's increasingly troublesome relations with New Delhi became noisy, during the 1960s, as demonstrated by their border clash in 1962. On the other hand, Pakistan viewed China as an important counterweight to India and the situation resulted in a new regional balance, where an Indo-Soviet alliance was facing a Sino-Pakistani entente.

Russia-Pakistan differences over Afghanistan emerged as another factor in their bilateral divergence since the final major episode of the Cold War unfolded with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan's decision to support the Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation while becoming the conduit for the transfer of Chinese and American weapons to various Mujahideen groups naturally enraged the Soviet leadership. It, thus, added another chapter of distrust in their bilateral relationship.

The end of the Cold War created genuine hopes that the two countries would now be able to improve their ties in a less polarised international environment. The departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, and the subsequent downfall of the Moscow-supported Najibullah regime in Kabul, in 1992, also removed an important irritant in the bilateral relationship. A degree of optimism was generated, when soon after the end of the Cold War Russia's new government signalled positively regarding its changing outlook towards South Asia. In a gesture of goodwill towards Islamabad, Russian Vice President, Rutskoi, visited Pakistan towards the end of December 1991. During his visit, Rutskoi not only supported Pakistan's proposal of declaring South Asia — a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ), but also made some important adjustments in Russia's Kashmir policy, when he asked both India and Pakistan to show respect for human rights, causing displeasure in New Delhi.⁴

This, however, proved to be a temporary thaw and could not be sustained, and the relations again deteriorated in the coming years. This was highlighted when, during President Boris Yeltsin's visit to India in 1993, Russia and India signed a new 20-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, a reminiscent of the 1971 treaty between the two countries. Russia again endorsed the Indian position on Kashmir and Yeltsin during

⁴ Rouben Azizian and Peter Vasileff, "Russia and Pakistan: The Difficult Path to Rapprochement," *Asian Affairs*, 37.

his visit to India remarked on Kashmir that “the truth is on the side of India.”⁵ During the rest of the 1990s, Russia remained tilted towards its old ally in the region, which was demonstrated on several occasions. For example, Moscow openly sided with New Delhi during the 1999 Kargil Crisis and expressed its concerns regarding Pakistan’s moves in the disputed area.⁶

Increasing Warmth

Developments in the region following 9/11, however, had a more soothing effect on Russia-Pakistan discord. Pakistan’s decision to withdraw its support to the Taliban regime in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan was well-received in Moscow, as it eliminated an important post-Cold War element of friction in the Russia-Pakistan relationship. Consequently, soon after 9/11, the two countries initiated regular contacts and started a dialogue under Pakistan-Russia Joint Working Group on Terrorism in 2002, followed by a dialogue on strategic stability in 2003. President Musharraf also visited Moscow in February 2003, which was the first such visit since 1970, when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited Russia.

An important turning point in this positive trajectory, however, came with the visit of Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Fradkov, to Pakistan in 2007. He has been the first Russian Prime Minister to visit Pakistan in the post-Soviet era, and the first in 38 years. Since then there have been sustainable improvements in the bilateral relationship. For example, the two countries initiated another structured dialogue in 2009, in the form of annual quadrilateral summits between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia and Tajikistan, which also included bilateral meetings between the Presidents of Russia and Pakistan and first such meeting was held in Tajikistan in 2009. The bilateral relations further expanded at a similar summit in Sochi in August 2010. Most important in this regard has been the decision to establish Russia-Pakistan Inter-Governmental Commission

⁵ Sanjoy Hazarika, “Despite US, Yeltsin Backs Rocket Deal with India,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/30/world/despite-us-yeltsin-backs-rocket-deal-with-india.html>

⁶ Mussarat Javaid Cheema, “International Community on Kargil Conflict,” *South Asian Studies*, 28, no. 1 (January-June 2013): 92.

on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Cooperation, which held its first meeting in September 2010.

In further developments, Russia openly supported Pakistan's bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2011.⁷ Similarly, Russia also condemned the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) cross-border air attack on the Pakistan Army's Salala check-post on the Pak-Afghan border in November 2011, that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Russia's Foreign Minister emphasised the unacceptability of violating the sovereignty of states, including during the planning and carrying out of counter-terrorist operations.⁸ Increased conversation between the two countries was highlighted by the fact that, between 2008 and 2012, Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, met six times with Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev.

Similarly, the two countries have also initiated a bilateral strategic dialogue at the levels of foreign secretaries, aimed at seeking a 'multidimensional relationship' encompassing defence, commerce and energy and its first round was held in August 2013. Meanwhile, the Russia-Pakistan dialogue on strategic stability dealing with the issues related to arms control, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and building up global and regional security held ten rounds of talks. In the 10th meeting of the consultative group on strategic stability dialogue, held in April 2016, both states have called for "the need to create a regional and global environment that guaranteed equal and undiminished security to all states."⁹

The two countries have also been increasing contacts between their defence establishments. For example, the visit by Pakistan Army Chief General, Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, to Russia in October 2012, has been an important milestone. This has been followed by a reciprocal visit by the

⁷ "On Heels of Bin Laden Killing, Pakistan President Visits Moscow," *Russia Today*, May 12, 2011, <https://www.rt.com/politics/pakistan-russia-meeting-medvedev-kremlin/>

⁸ "No NATO excuse to violate Pakistan sovereignty - Russia," *Reuters*, November 28, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-nato-pakistan-idUKTRE7AR1LE20111128>

⁹ Press Release, Embassy of Pakistan (Doha), <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/qatar/pr-details.php?prID=3686>

Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces of the Russian Federation, Col. Gen. Vladimir V. Chirkin, to Pakistan in August 2013. The Russian Air Force Chief visited Pakistan in April 2013. Pakistan Naval Ship (PNS) Aslat made a port call, a first ever port call made by any Pakistani Navy ship to Russia, in October 2013, followed by PNS Rahnaward, who made two port calls to Russia in the same month. A naval unit of the Russian Pacific fleet made a port call to Pakistan in April 2014. Similarly, all three Commanders-In-Chief of Russia's armed forces visited Pakistan in 2014. In July 2015, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, also paid a visit to Russia.

Russia has also signalled interest in selling its military hardware to Pakistan. In June 2014, Moscow lifted its self-imposed and undeclared embargo on arms supplies to Pakistan. Following that, it has been able to negotiate an agreement with Pakistan to supply four Mi-35 Hind attack helicopters. On the other hand, Pakistan has also expressed its interest in a broad range of Russian military weaponry including air defence systems, combat aircrafts, particularly the Su-35 and advanced tanks. Meanwhile, during the period, Russia has also allowed China to transfer JF-17's engines to Pakistan. The JF-17 combat aircraft is jointly manufactured by China and Pakistan.

Russia has also signed a broader 'military cooperation' agreement with Pakistan during the visit of its Defence Minister, General Sergei Shoigu, to Islamabad in November 2014, which has been the first such visit since 1969. General Shoigu remarked on the occasion that Russia wanted 'peaceful solution' to all problems in the region and that the "world community not only praised but wanted to do business with Pakistan now."¹⁰ In a concrete development with regard to the pursuance of the agreement, the two countries have held the first-ever joint military exercise during September-October 2016. In this joint military exercise, named 'Friendship 2016,' around 200 military personnel participated.

Most importantly, the exercises with Russian ground forces went ahead despite strong Indian objections in the wake of heightened

¹⁰ "Pakistan, Russia sign milestone military co-op pact," *Nation*, November 21, 2014, <http://nation.com.pk/national/21-Nov-2014/pakistan-russia-sign-milestone-military-co-op-pact>

tensions between Pakistan and India following an attack on the Uri military camp in the India-held Kashmir. New Delhi has even expressed its displeasure on the development, and the Indian envoy to Pakistan remarked on the occasion that Russia's military cooperation with Pakistan was "a wrong approach and it would only create problems."¹¹ In a reflection of India's apparent unhappiness over Russia's joint military exercise with Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister invoked a Russian proverb "an old friend is better than two new friends," during his remarks at a joint press event with Putin after the BRICS Summit in India, in October 2016.¹² Meanwhile, Russian Defence Ministry has also announced plans to hold a second round of joint military exercises with Pakistan in 2017.¹³

Factors Behind Increasing Warmth

The growing thaw in the Russia-Pakistan relationship is a function of many factors that are embedded in the evolving geopolitical and geo-economic transformations in the region. These factors can be summarised as follows:

Afghanistan

Moscow has been facing a strange dilemma in Afghanistan since 9/11. While it welcomed the removal of the Taliban regime in Kabul, in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11, it has also been uneasy about the long-term implications of the continued presence of the US forces in the country. Moscow thinks that the geographical location of Afghanistan is highly suitable for setting up military bases that can "exert pressure on a vast region, including Central Asia, the Caspian littoral states and the Persian Gulf, which is rich in oil and gas and other

¹¹ "India Conveys to Moscow its Opposition to Russia-Pakistan Military Exercise," *Indian Express*, October 11, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-conveys-to-moscow-its-opposition-to-russia-pakistan-military-exercise-3077204/>

¹² "'Old Friend is Better than 2 New Friends': India, Russia Sign 16 Key Pacts in Goa," *Rediff News*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/pix-india-russia-sign-16-key-pacts-in-go/20161015.htm>

¹³ "Russian Land Forces to Hold Drills with India, Pakistan in 2017," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, December 01, 2016, http://in.rbth.com/news/2016/12/01/russian-land-forces-to-hold-drills-with-india-pakistan-in-2017_652543

resources.”¹⁴ Russia has been uneasy about the US presence in Afghanistan, which it thinks has the potential of undermining Russia’s position in the region and beyond.

This Russian dilemma has recently gained a new twist in the wake of contradictory signals emanating from Washington, regarding future trajectory of the US mission in Afghanistan with a complete pull-out being offered as one option, and the possibility of development of permanent US military bases in the country as another. Consequently, Moscow has been concerned about the stability of Afghanistan if Washington opts for a complete withdrawal of its forces from the country, where the Afghan National Army (ANA) will face daunting challenges in controlling the widespread Taliban insurgency while, on the other hand, it has been deeply uneasy about the possibility of a permanent establishment of western military bases in Afghanistan.

Moscow’s dilemma in Afghanistan has been evident from the pronouncement of Zamir Kabulov, Russia’s special envoy to Afghanistan. Expressing his concern about the return of instability to Afghanistan with the possible departure of the US forces from the country, he has remarked that “if things go the way they go now – there is a prospect of chaos” in the country.¹⁵ And at the same time, he expressed concerns about the possibility of establishment of a permanent US military bases in Afghanistan following the departure of the bulk of the US-led forces from the country. He remarked that Washington’s plans about military bases in Afghanistan raised questions for the Russian leadership, which wanted to have a ‘transparent picture for these military bases’ and maintained that the “foreign military bases had never aided stability in this region, and were doubly unlikely to do so if the final goals and agenda of the troops remained unknown.”¹⁶

Russia is, thus, concerned about increased instability and uncertainty in Afghanistan particularly in the context of its spill-over effects into the Central Asian states. Highlighting Moscow’s concerns in this regard,

¹⁴ Umer Nessar, “Zamir Kabulov: One should Go to Afghanistan Open-heartedly,” *Afghanistan*, May 29, 2011, <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/243.html>

¹⁵ “There’s Still Hope for Afghanistan – Russian Envoy,” *Russia Today*, December 11, 2011, <https://www.rt.com/news/afghanistan-recovery-russian-envoy-525/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

President Putin declared in 2013, that the evolving situation in Afghanistan was a “matter of direct concern for our national security.”¹⁷ The Russian concerns in this regard have been highlighted by the continued presence of its military bases in Tajikistan, a country most affected by the situation in Afghanistan. Recently, Russia has further modernised its military hardware in Tajikistan, where the security situation has deteriorated rapidly over the last couple of years. Russian Deputy Defence Minister, Anatoly Antonov, who visited the country in February 2016, remarked in Dushanbe that “our Tajik friends and brothers are experiencing new challenges and threats, taking into account the problems emanating from Afghanistan.”¹⁸

Moscow has even deemed it necessary to show gestures of goodwill towards Pakistani and Afghan Taliban at a time when the US is also not hesitant in talking to the Taliban movement. This has occurred particularly in the wake of the introduction of a new element in the Afghan civil war i.e. the appearance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whom Moscow views as its bigger concern in the Middle East. Kabulov has remarked in this regard, that “there is no doubt that ISIS is training militants from Russia in Afghanistan as part of its efforts to expand into Central Asia.”¹⁹

With this changing Russian approach towards the Taliban movement, Kabulov remarked that the Taliban movement is itself subject to terrorist attacks.²⁰ He further added that “Taliban interests objectively coincide with ours” in the context of growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan. He also pointed out that “both the Afghan and the Pakistani

¹⁷ President of Russia, “Security Council Meeting,” May 8, 2013, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/5381>

¹⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, “Russia Reinforces Tajikistan Base with 100 New Armored Vehicles,” *Diplomat*, June 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/russia-reinforces-tajikistan-base-with-100-new-armored-vehicles/>

¹⁹ Javid Ahmad, “Russia and Taliban Make Amends: Moscow’s New Ally in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-01-31/russia-and-taliban-make-amends>, see also Kim Sengupta, “World Powers Seek Unlikely Alliance with Taliban,” *Independent*, January 8, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/world-powers-seek-unlikely-alliance-with-taliban-as-interests-coincide-in-battle-against-common-a6801516.html>

²⁰ “There’s Still Hope for Afghanistan - Russian Envoy,” *Russia Today*, December 11, 2011, <https://www.rt.com/news/afghanistan-recovery-russian-envoy-525/>

Taliban have said they don't recognise ISIS and they don't recognise the ISIS leader [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi as the caliph, and that it was 'very important.'" At the same time, he revealed that Russia had "communication channels with the Taliban to exchange information."²¹

The increased deference of the Russian leadership towards Pakistan, thus, should be viewed in the context of increasingly complex challenges being faced by Moscow in the evolving Afghan scenario. Russia considers Pakistan as highly important for the stabilisation of Afghanistan if the US decides to withdraw completely from the country as it believes that "the problem of Afghanistan cannot be resolved without the constructive involvement of Pakistan and Iran."²² Afghanistan has, thus, been an important area of discussion during the recent contacts between Moscow and Islamabad and the 2014 military agreement, specifically emphasises that the two share "similar views on developments in Afghanistan and doing business with each other."²³

China

During the Cold War, China has been an important constraint in the path to normalisation of Russia-Pakistan relations. Pakistan gave primacy to its relationship with China, while Moscow remained tilted towards India. Russia-Pakistan differences around the China were highlighted, when the Soviets proposed the system of 'collective security' in Asia in 1969. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, an important architect of Pakistan's drift towards China during the 1960s, while discussing the prospects of Pakistan

²¹ Javid Ahmad, "Russia and Taliban Make Amends: Moscow's New Ally in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-01-31/russia-and-taliban-make-amends>, see also Kim Sengupta, "World Powers Seek Unlikely Alliance with Taliban," *Independent*, January 8, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/world-powers-seek-unlikely-alliance-with-taliban-as-interests-coincide-in-battle-against-common-a6801516.html>

²² Vladimir Radyuhin, "Still Waiting for the Bear Hug," *Hindu*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/still-waiting-for-the-bear-hug/article3943960.ece>

²³ Joy Mitra, "Russia, China and Pakistan: An Emerging New Axis?," *Diplomat*, August 18, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/russia-china-and-pakistan-an-emerging-new-axis/>

joining the system that called for Indo-Pakistan reconciliation and had an anti-China twist, made it clear that:

the collaboration with India can follow the settlement of the disputes provided it is not a precondition to a military collaboration poised against China. If it is to be a stage in the development of a military collaboration, it cannot be accepted, even if economic bounties flow out of it or even if it comes after the settlement of India-Pakistan disputes. Being directed against China it will spell disaster.²⁴

In the post-Cold War era, with the normalisation of Sino-Russian relations, Beijing became a facilitating factor in the process of rapprochement between Islamabad and Moscow. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era the Russian and Chinese leadership made an effort to harmonise their policies towards South Asia, as demonstrated by the initiation of the formal process of induction of both India and Pakistan in the SCO. Russia and China have also coordinated on the Afghan issue and have been spelling out their common concerns through their joint statements from the SCO forum. More recently, Russia, China and Pakistan are also holding trilateral consultations on the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.²⁵

The China factor has been facilitating the process of rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan in other ways also. In this regard, some important regional developments like Gwadar-centered China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are reshaping Russian outlook towards the region. The year 2015, saw Putin and Chinese President, Xi Jinping, strike a deal to pursue joint development projects between the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese 'New Silk Road Economic Belt' of which CPEC is an important part. Most importantly, Pakistan's warm waters have always been of great economic and strategic importance for Russia and present-day "Russian dream is also Pakistan-

²⁴ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *Pakistan and the Alliances* (Lahore: Classic, 1994), 39.

²⁵ "Moscow to Host Russia-China-Pakistan Strategic Talks on Afghanistan in December: Kabulov," *Dawn*, November 21, 2016, <http://nation.com.pk/international/21-Nov-2016/moscow-to-host-russia-china-pakistan-strategic-talks-on-afghanistan-in-december-kabulov>

dependent, because of geography.”²⁶ Way back during the late 1960 when Islamabad and Moscow enjoyed a brief moment of cordiality — the Soviet government assisted in improving the Gwadar port, which has now gained an international fame as it becomes the key hub of the CPEC project.

Interestingly, these developments are occurring at a time when Russia is facing economic hardships in the wake of plummeting energy prices and western economic sanctions because of the Ukraine crisis. Russians have, thus, exhibited interest in CPEC and other infrastructure related investments in Pakistan. Moscow has even inked a deal with Pakistan to invest US\$2bn in a project of constructing North-South gas pipeline, connecting Karachi and Lahore, which is expected to conclude by 2018. Pakistan has even expressed interest in concluding a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.²⁷

Such an outcome will link up CPEC with the European Union (EU) nations connecting the whole region in a trade block. Russia has shown interest in the economic integration of region in the recent years. The Russian state-run Gazprom has exhibited its readiness to be involved in the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline.²⁸ The Russia-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Quadrilateral Forum has also highlighted several regional projects for the economic integration of the countries including the development of a land corridor connecting Pakistan and Tajikistan through Afghanistan’s narrow strip of Wakhan. These also include the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (CASA-1000) with Putin pledging to invest US\$500 million in CASA-1000 and offering to help fund and build the other projects. Indeed, Russian analysts have rediscovered the geographical importance

²⁶ Shaukat Qadir, “Russia Warms to Pakistan as Opportunity Knocks All Over Asia,” *National*, September 20, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/russia-warms-to-pakistan-as-opportunity-knocks-all-over-asia>

²⁷ “Pakistan Keen to Join EEU Free Trade Area – Prime Minister,” *Sputnik International*, August 26, 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201508261026204927/>

²⁸ Umer Nessar, “Zamir Kabulov: One should Go to Afghanistan Open-heartedly,” *Afghanistan.ru*, May 29, 2011, <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/243.html>

of Pakistan and describe the country as “the ‘Zipper’ of Pan-Eurasian Integration.”²⁹

India

Russia-Pakistan relations have been historically a function of the Indian factor and Moscow has mainly viewed its relations with Islamabad and New Delhi as a zero-sum game. With the end of the Cold War, a rationalisation of the Russian policy towards the region has been unfortunately lagging much behind the changing dynamics of the region. The US has been able to de-hyphenate its relations with India and Pakistan to a certain degree, and has been able to engage both the nations. On the other hand, Russia has kept its relationship with Pakistan hostage to India. There is, however, an increased realisation in Moscow that Pakistan has its own unique importance for the Russian interests, and an opening up with Islamabad is necessary.

On the other hand, important shifts have also occurred in New Delhi’s outlook in the post-Cold War era. During the Cold War, Russia was the only key international ally of India, however, in the recent years, New Delhi has slowly drifted towards the US and the US-India strategic partnership has increasingly flourished after 9/11. India has also developed increasingly warm relationships with the countries of EU and the US allies like Japan. Similarly, India now enjoys closer economic relationship with China as compared to Russia, while keeping aloof its divergence with Beijing on Pakistan. Thus, today Russia is not the only strategic partner of India.

This has naturally led to competing pulls in the Indian effort to maintain its diverse strategic partnerships at the global level. An important manifestation in this regard has been in the context of Russia’s arms exports to New Delhi, which has been historically a major importer of the Russian weaponry, providing crucial fiscal space to the Soviets. However, in the post-Cold War period, New Delhi has increasingly diversified its arms imports, becoming a major buyer of the western defence technology. In this regard, American and various European arms

²⁹ Andrew Korybko, “Pakistan is The ‘Zipper’ of Pan-Eurasian Integration,” *Russian Institute of Strategic Studies*, September 15, 2015, <http://en.riss.ru/analysis/18882/>

suppliers have successfully competed with the Russian offers during the period. The most high-profile deal in this respect has been the acquisition of 36 French Rafale jet fighters by the Indian Air Force, instead of opting for the competing Russian MiG-35. Indeed, since 2011, the US has surpassed Russia as top military vendor to India. For example, between 2011 and 2014, India has imported US\$13.9 billion in military equipment from the US and only US\$5.34 billion from Russia.³⁰ In another distinction, India has also emerged as the second biggest buyer of the US weapons in 2015, behind only to Saudi Arabia.³¹

All this has not lost its impact on the Russian thinking, and has also encouraged it to diversify its ties in the region prompting increased contacts with Pakistan and an interest in tapping of Pakistani defence market. It has been in the background of such transformations in India's relations with the US and Russia that a leading Russian expert on Southern and Central Asia, Professor Vyacheslav Belokrenitsky, has noted, "if New Delhi is going to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US by entering into an exclusive long-lasting peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement with them and opening up the way for cooperation with the West in the military-technical sphere, can it rely on the fact that Russia will still refrain from military cooperation with Pakistan that would be to Russia's advantage? The point here, of course, is not that the vector of Moscow's military-technical cooperation itself will change, but that the implementation of certain corrections is possible and even necessary."³²

³⁰ Sam LaGrone, "US Edges Out Russia to Become India's Largest Military Equipment Vendor," *United States Naval Institute (USNI), News*, August 13, 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/08/13/u-s-edges-russia-become-indias-largest-military-equipment-vendor>

³¹ Natalie Obiko Pearson, "India Surges to Second-Biggest US Weapons Buyer," *Bloomberg*, September 27, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-27/india-surges-to-second-biggest-u-s-weapons-buyer-as-china-rises>

³² Quoted in Sergey Kamenev, "Russia-Pakistan: the Way is Open for New Projects," *Oriental Review*, February 12, 2013, <http://orientalreview.org/2013/02/12/russia-pakistan-the-way-is-open-for-new-projects/>

Future Prospects for Pak-Russia Relations

Russia's strategic culture oscillates between a Western/European identity on the one extreme and a unique Eurasian self, encompassing both European and Asian traits on the other. According to its western self-image, Russia is a normal European power and an equal member of the Western community of nations. On the other hand, the Eurasianist stream in Russian self-identification 'underlines Russia's closeness to Asia' and states that "Russia is neither the West nor the East" and is rather 'special.'³³ The cumulative effect of these contending trends has been an 'existential ambivalence' in Russia's foreign relations producing competing pulls in the Russian foreign policy debates.³⁴

However, as noticed by Yuri Fedorov, there have been shifts in Russia's self-identification since 2007, and Russia now considers itself as "an influential centre of a multipolar world" involved in an 'ideological competition' with the West, which emphasises that "instead of integrating itself into a globalising international system Russia should stay outside of globalisation and strive to maximise its independence."³⁵ This has occurred in the wake of growing trouble in the Russia-West relations revolving around the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, crises in the Balkan and the Western attitudes towards the Chechnya that has further exacerbated with the development of Ukrainian and Georgian crises.

Consequently, Russia has paid more attention to the broader Asian region in the recent years. Russia has further solidified its partnership with China to ward off growing western pressure and has sought close relations with other Asian countries. Russia has even actively involved itself in the political dynamics of the Middle East in the recent years as demonstrated by its role in the Syrian civil war occurring as a dire consequence of the 'Arab Spring.' Moscow's more attention towards

³³ For a discussion on various interpretations of Russian identity see, Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?," *International Affairs* 76, no. 3 (2000): 443-458.

³⁴ Baranovsky, 445.

³⁵ Yuri Fedorov, "Russia: 'New' Inconsistent Nuclear Thinking and Policy" in Muttiah Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137.

Pakistan, in the recent years, thus, can also be viewed in the context of this general trend of the Russian foreign policy towards the larger Middle Eastern region.

India, however, continues to be a factor in Russia's calculations regarding Pakistan and the Russia-Pakistan relationship. Russia-India defence trade continues to thrive. Though India has diversified its arms imports in the post-Cold War era after the development of its strategic partnership with the US, it continues to remain a major buyer of the Russian weaponry. For example, New Delhi has inked large defence deals with Russia amounting to some US\$6 billion in 2016, during Putin's visit to India. This includes the supply of S-400 long-range air defence missiles, naval frigates, leasing of Russia's nuclear submarine and a joint venture for production of Ka-226T helicopters. Besides, Russia also has lucrative deals with India in the nuclear energy sector and is installing nuclear power plants in India.

Despite that there is no doubt Pakistan has developed a niche in Russia's strategic outlook towards the larger Asian region with a sustainable upward trend in the bilateral relationship. The recent Russia-Pakistan beginning has its limits in the short run due to India factor and will depend on New Delhi's ability to foot the bill of Russian 'obedience' in the form of major defence purchases. However, there can be great opportunities if there occurs an increased convergence between Moscow and Islamabad on the evolving situation in Afghanistan. More importantly, if a successful economic integration can be achieved in the region where Pakistan's coastal areas are able to become an outlet for the oil and gas resources of Russia and the Central Asian nations. In such a scenario, Pakistan may be able to realise a newer version of 'triangular tightrope,' a policy it tried to follow unsuccessfully during the 1960s in an effort to cultivate equally good relations with the US, Russia and China.