

# Russia's Strategic Calculus in South Asia and Pakistan's Role: Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

*Russia has begun to adopt a politically pronounced approach towards Pakistan, which indicates a shift in Moscow's long-standing patterns of engagement with Islamabad. Against this background, this paper attempts to address this question as to what role Pakistan can play in Russia's strategic calculus in South Asia and what policy options needs to be adopted for capitalising on Kremlin's shifting posture. In terms of achieving its strategic, political and economic goals, Russia seems to assign a special place to Pakistan and this was reflected in Moscow's engagement with Islamabad in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process, military-to-military collaboration and defence cooperation. Indeed, Pakistan fits well in Russia's South Asia strategic calculus and the two countries can benefit a great deal from each other but the fact remains that there are many impediments and irritants as well. Moscow-Islamabad ties can flourish fully only if intensive dialogues are regularly convened between civil, military and economic institutions. Besides, Pakistan must expand and diversify its foreign policy options for capitalising the most from changing regional and international scenarios of which Russia's evolving South Asia posture is but one element.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan-Russia Relations, South Asia, Strategic Calculus, Afghan Peace Process.

## Introduction

The world is standing on a precipice of multipolarity and, in this milieu, a new set of engagements and alignments is on the play. The trends of multipolarity became more prominent, which created geostrategic spaces for major powers to manoeuvre for their interests. Pakistan-Russia relations are experiencing a renaissance in this context. President Vladimir Putin publicly

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supported Pakistan's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).<sup>1</sup> In August 2013, the Russian Colonel-General, Vladimir Chirkin, paid a visit to Pakistan for a detailed discussion on the issues of strategic importance.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan-Russia relations reached a milestone when Moscow lifted its self-imposed arms embargo on Pakistan in 2014. Consequently, Mi-35 assault helicopters were delivered to Pakistan despite strong opposition from India.

Indeed, such developments indicate a shift in the Russian perception towards Pakistan. Significance of Pakistan is also evident in regional politics, particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The emerging threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan, China-Russia growing cooperation and the pronounced role of geopolitics in Central Asia, have created an environment which has aligned Pakistan's and Russia's interests. A new Cold War is emerging in which the US is naming Russia and China as its strategic competitors while the other two are re-orienting to new alignments and positioning for a bigger stake in the regional and world order. Here, in this context, Russia and China are aligning their interests while Pakistan, being a staunch ally of Beijing, is a natural preference for Moscow.

Although the reluctant friends (Russia and Pakistan) have had on-again, off-again episodes of engagement, this time, their bilateral engagement is different: It is not confined to defence and military only, there is ample cooperation in the economic field as well. Their rapprochement started, more visibly in 2014, with Pak-Russia Defence Cooperation Agreement in which the two countries agreed upon cooperating on strategic, politico-military and promoting international peace and security along with collaborating in the fields of education, science and technology, agriculture and peacekeeping operations. This agreement was a landmark achievement as Kremlin lifted its self-imposed arms embargo on Islamabad. In the following years, they conducted joint military exercises, joint naval exercises. Russia also delivered Mi-35 assault helicopters to Pakistan and

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<sup>1</sup> "Russia Endorses Full SCO Membership for Pakistan," *Dawn*, November 7, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/671932>

<sup>2</sup> "Vladimir Chirkin Visited the Major Command of Pakistan Army," *News World Russia*, August 9, 2013, <https://newsworldrussia.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/vladimir-chirkin-visited-the-major-command-of-pakistan-army/>

negotiations are underway for further purchase of arms. In October 2015, the two nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to build an 1100 km-long gas pipeline to connect LNG terminals in Sindh and Punjab. Headed by a Russian company, RT Global Resources, this project was expected to be implemented in 2018. With this background, it seems pertinent to understand what factors are shaping Russia's strategic calculus in South Asia and whether Pakistan has any role to play in it.

Much has been written on Russia's strategic calculus, its threat perceptions and the instruments to pursue its goals. In his book, *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*, Stephen R Covington explains that Russia is unique in its history, geography and the challenges it confronts in the global arena.<sup>3</sup> In a research article, "Russia's Pivot to Eurasia," Roy Allison explores Moscow's increasing engagement with the Eurasian region and delineates the global and regional constructs in which the Russian vision is embedded. In another article, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," Alison Roy, underlines the changes in the country's threat perceptions towards Central Asia and highlights the shifts in its overall policy.<sup>4</sup> Russia's South Asia policy is a vector of its Central Asia policy, in fact, Russia's overall strategic calculus is aimed at isolating the US in the Eurasian region. By supporting the Taliban's political inclusion in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process, which it did in Pakistan-China-Russia Trilateral Dialogue,<sup>5</sup> Moscow can undermine the American influence in Kabul. Moreover, its multi-faceted and multi-dimensional cooperation with China can deliver on both economic and strategic fronts. Being implemented at a time when the US influence is declining globally, Russia's strategic calculus has far-reaching implications both at the regional and global level.

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen R Covington, "*The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*," (Cambridge: Belfer Centre, 2016): 10-15, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Culture%20of%20Strategic%20Thought%203.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no.2 (2004): 277-293, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2004.00383.x>

<sup>5</sup> "China, Russia, Pakistan Joining Hands on Afghan Problem: The Report," *Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sign-of-worry-for-india-china-russia-pakistan-joining-hands-on-afghan-problem-says-report/articleshow/57985232.cms>

In order to answer whether Pakistan has any role to play in Russia's strategic calculus (South Asia), this paper first presents an overview of Russia's strategic calculus in South Asia and then examines Pakistan's role in it.

### **Russia's Strategic Calculus in South Asia**

The Ukraine crisis, which began in November 2013, triggered a cascade of strategic events in the international arena. Russia's relations with the West deteriorated and it faced a backlash from the West in the form of the US and EU sanctions. These developments urged Moscow to adjust its security and military documents according to the changing geostrategic and geo-economic environment. On December 25, 2014, a new military document was adopted and, on November 30, 2016, a new foreign policy concept was brought to the fore. This rapid evolution indicated that Russia's perceptions of its strategic environment, the instruments and measures to pursue its strategic goals are witnessing some form of transformation. Also, the new foreign policy document reflects this transformation and emphasised the following mentioned features<sup>6</sup>:

- i. The country's status as a leading world power should be emphasised. The strategic security document stated, "Russia is a great power again and has increasingly involved in the resolution of major international conflicts and in ensuring strategic stability."
- ii. The Foreign Policy Concept mentioned that the country has become "a centre of influence in today's world."
- iii. The strategic document emphasised that the new international scene is chaotic, volatile and marked by competition over resources. A multi-polar world is emerging which can rightly be characterised by regional and global instability.
- iv. Sustaining Russia's eminent position in the post-Soviet space is a key foreign policy goal. The Common Wealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), SCO and the

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<sup>6</sup>The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by Russian President Putin on November 30, 2016)*, December 1, 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248)

Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) are the important vectors in the budding multi-centric world.

- v. The erosion of the neo-liberal world order has now become a harsh reality. The West's attempts to maintain the decaying structures of the world order by manipulating through political, economic and strategic toolkits are leading to greater instability.
- vi. Moscow will pay special attention to the structures, instruments and states which would help facilitate the process of the Eurasian integration.

In the same vein, the 2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy outlined that the country intends to continue its strategic partnership with India.<sup>7</sup> With regards to Afghanistan, it indicated that Russia "aims to achieve peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan as a peace-loving sovereign neutral state with a stable economy" by working with the other stakeholders and multilateral institutions. Russia's approach towards South Asia has also been highlighted in the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020 and the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation to 2020. The two documents noted that the security situation in Afghanistan and South Asia had a negative impact on the international climate and that Russia is focused on "transforming the Indian Ocean into a zone of peace, stability and good neighbourly relations."

Recently, Russia has begun to express interest in Pakistan and its political approach towards Islamabad has become more pronounced. Since the issues of South Asia, in terms of the realm of geo-economy and geopolitics, reverberate in both countries, which is creating a potential sphere of convergence of mutual interests. Despite the huge geographical distance between them, Russia and Pakistan are confronted with a range of similar challenges: terrorism, peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, nuclear security and problems of economic development. Contrary to the previous pattern of the Russian engagement with Pakistan, now Moscow has started to approach Islamabad as part of its larger strategy in South Asia. The convergence of their economic and politico-security agenda in South

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<sup>7</sup> "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 12, 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186)

and Central Asia is emerging as an important instrument in the evolving regional politics.

Russia's resurgence, as a great global power, seems to reshape its strategic vision in the adjacent regions as well. It is a well-known fact that Moscow is preoccupied with securing its immediate neighbourhood and maintaining friendly ties with the pro-Russia governments in Central Asia. Besides, domestic stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity are its major national interests. Securing its territory from infiltration of foreign agents that may create chaos in the country is also a priority for Moscow. The trans-national radical and militant organisations are a case in point: ISIS and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The agenda of regional stability also acquires a high place which reflects in its quest for fostering peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Overall, Moscow's foreign policy goals are driven by the following objectives:<sup>8</sup>

- i. To maintain the Russian influence in its immediate neighbourhood.
- ii. To ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- iii. To localise those conflicts which can spread to its borders.
- iv. To undermine the US influence at the global and regional level.
- v. To work with the regional countries for building a multipolar world.
- vi. To foster economic cooperation with other countries.

In South as well, its larger strategic aims are reflective of its overall strategic calculus. To be more specific, Russia's South Asia policy reflects the overall strategic calculus of the country. Its goals are:

- i. To undermine the US influence and particularly reduce Washington's leverage in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process.
- ii. To find alternatives markets for the Russian oil and gas (products and services).

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew et al., "Russia's 2020 Strategic Economic Goals and the Role of International Integration," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2008, <http://www.ifpa.org/confrcNworkshp/confrcNworkshpPages/usRussiaMarch2011/Russias%202020%20Strategic%20Goals.pdf>

- iii. To materialise its vision of the Pan-Eurasian integration in order to resurge as a great power.
- iv. To work in close collaboration with China and build a regional political and economic order, dominated by Beijing and Moscow.
- v. To synergise EAU with SCO and materialise the vision of 'Greater Eurasia.'

### **Pakistan's Role: Bilateral Engagements and Challenges**

Russia recognised Pakistan's geostrategic importance and has been working towards fostering an all-comprehensive relationship with the country. Moscow and Islamabad also conducted joint military exercises which were dubbed as "Friendship 2017." In December 2017, while speaking at a seminar on Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Strategic Stability, the first Secretary of the Russian embassy in Islamabad, Pavel Didkovsky stated, "Moscow neither opposed nor wished to block Pakistan's application to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)."<sup>9</sup> There, he highlighted the possibility to join the group for those states which have not yet signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Later on, the Russian Ambassador to Pakistan, Alexey Dedov, further elaborated on his country's approach on this issue, "Russia has no objections to Pakistan's membership of the NSG. We are ready to work towards consensus-based discussions on this issue."<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the bilateral economic ties witnessed an upward trajectory. For instance, the Russian companies expressed their interest in investing in Pakistan's energy sector. Inter-Rao Engineering and Himash Apparatus, a Russian oil and gas consortium, has recently signed an MoU with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Oil and Gas Company Limited (KPOGCL) to establish an oil refinery in Kohat.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Russia Lifts Arms Embargo to Pakistan," *Dawn*, June 2, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1110131> and SibKaiffee, "Russia Signals Support for Pakistan's NSG Candidature," *Arab News*, December 18, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1210756/world>

<sup>10</sup> "Russia-Pakistan Relations: is there a New Trajectory?," Islamabad Policy Research Institute, August 1, 2018, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/prrelease61.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> "KPOGCL, Russian Consortium Sign MOU to Establish Oil Refinery," *Frontier Post*, February 1, 2018.

As envisioned in its strategic documents, Pakistan is helpful in connecting the massive landmass of the Eurasian region. By instrumentalising China-Russia strategic partnership, Pakistan can connect the region through multilateral forums such as the EEU, SCO and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Although Pakistan is located at a strategically important position where it can help join different economic blocs in the region, the catalyst for the Eurasian integration is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is a trans-national corridor, stretching from the Karakorum Highway to Gwadar and includes a network of railroads, highways and power stations across the country. Pakistan has a two-fold role to play in the Russian strategic calculus which is as under:

- i. A lynchpin in Russia's dream of Pan-Eurasian integration.
- ii. An important partner in the emerging multi-polar world, particularly at the regional level.

Russia is also looking for options such as developing a gas pipeline from Iran to India via Gwadar. It is planning to export gas to India and Pakistan. This project has been long opposed by the US and has faced several delays. The sixth meeting of the Pakistan-Russia Intergovernmental Commission was held to identify areas of cooperation in trade, technology, science and economy.<sup>12</sup> Later, in a meeting between the Pakistani Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, the two sides gave an impetus to the offshore gas pipeline by reaching an agreement.<sup>13</sup>

In a recent trilateral meeting with the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers in New Delhi, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, urged India to find ways to join the CPEC and benefit from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this way, Russia has thrown its weight behind Pakistan's efforts to implement the CPEC, which has been vehemently opposed by India. Yet, this will not be a smooth path especially when Russia considers

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<sup>12</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan, Russia Form Panel to Set Up Military Cooperation," *Dawn*, February 21, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1390716>

<sup>13</sup> Irfan Ghauri, "SCO Summit: Pakistan is Adamant to Fight Terrorism, says PM Abbasi," *Express Tribune*, December 1, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1573635/1-pm-abbasi-meets-russian-counterpart-sco-summit/>



India its “privileged strategic partner” and engaging with it in a meaningful and substantive partnership. Here, if Pakistan remains too apprehensive of Moscow's cordial ties with New Delhi, it would become very difficult for it to navigate the complexities of Russia's policies of balancing with India.

Russia has used multilateral institutions instrumentally to increase its strategic and economic outreach towards South Asia. In this regard, the EEU and SCO acquired a special place. Russia has encouraged the initiative of North-South corridor between Russia, Iran and India via the Caspian and Arabian seas. Along with this initiative, Russia has joined hands with China on the Silk Road Initiative and publicly supported this project, many times. In the Russia-India-China (RIC) meeting, Moscow's representative supported BRI and the CPEC and has also asked India to join this project.<sup>14</sup>

Through the CPEC, Pakistan fits in Russia's vision of Pan-Eurasian integration. Connecting Central Asia with South Asia, this corridor will become a convenient route for Russia. In the larger picture of Pak-Russia strategic convergence, Afghanistan evolved as a regional arena where, for the first time, Pakistan's and Iran's interests converged. In July 2018, a rare meeting among the spymasters from Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan reached the headlines in international media.<sup>15</sup> Not only did it surprise the people for its peculiarity but also shed light on the evolving consensus of the regional actors on the issue of Afghanistan. There are ample opportunities for Pakistan to increase cooperation with its estranged neighbour but it involves various complexities, too.

The pattern of the Russian engagement and investment in Pakistan is very interesting. In the official statements, Russia does endorse BRI and the CPEC but, in practice, it is creating its own niche in Pakistan's energy sector and, at the same time, avoiding any competition with the Chinese companies. The North-South Gas Corridor is the most significant among all the Russian projects and initiatives. The Minister of Energy of the Russian

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<sup>14</sup> Sanjeev Miglani, “Russia Urges India to Line Up Behind China's Belt and Road Initiative,” *Reuters*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-china-russia/russia-urges-india-to-line-up-behind-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-idUSKBN1E51EX>

<sup>15</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Hosts Unusual Meeting of Regional Spymasters,” *Voice of America*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-hosts-unusual-meeting-of-regional-spy-masters/4478723.html>

Federation, Alexander Novak, and Pakistan's Federal Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, signed an MoU for the construction of this corridor on October 16, 2015. Russia aims to invest US\$2 billion in this project.<sup>16</sup> The first phase of this project was expected to conclude by December 2017 but differences on the tariffs delayed the project. Inter-Rao and Himmash Appar, oil and gas refinery in Kohat is solely a bilateral project spearheaded by the Russian oil and gas consortium.<sup>17</sup> On February 19, 2018, while addressing the opening ceremony of the Russian Consulate in Karachi, Alexey YDedov, Russian Ambassador to Pakistan, offered to revive Pakistan's Steel Mills.<sup>18</sup>

Russia's vision is clear: To fight off the US domination, to cooperate with China to counter the US hegemony, become an influential power and maintain its influence in its backyard — Central Asia while weaving a web of energy and infrastructure projects in South and Central Asia. It is true that Pakistan fits well in Russia's geo-economic vision and it is more likely, also due to structural changes in the international order and system that Pakistan emerges as an important player in the Russian dream of Pan-Eurasian integration. (The Russian dream of Pan-Eurasian integration is more of a euphemism for the Russian resurgence and the efforts to keep Washington off the loop). Pakistan needs to be cautious and think carefully whether it is in a position to confront the US. Although, the world order is moving towards multipolarity but Washington is still a major player, hence, a "minus-US" formula in foreign policy directions may invite unnecessary troubles for Pakistan.

Unfortunately, it is still unclear what does Pakistan envision. Its foreign policy dilemma has been its dependence on a major power while balancing its turbulent relations with India. Instead of diversifying its relations with other major powers, it has always chosen to pick one and wear it like an armour. This real politic has earned the country 'masters' instead of 'partners' and 'friends.' This time, also, Pakistan's reactionary

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<sup>16</sup> "Pakistan, Russia Sign Agreement for Construction of North-South Gas Pipeline," *Dawn*, October 16, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1213460>

<sup>17</sup> "Russian Consortium Agrees to Set Up Refinery in K-P," *Express Tribune*, August 10, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1477821/russian-consortium-agrees-set-refinery-k-p/>

<sup>18</sup> Fareed A Malik, "Revival of Steel Mills," *Nation*, February 14, 2018, <https://nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2018/revival-of-steel-mills>

approach is guiding it towards Moscow, but Islamabad needs to break this pattern of engagement. This is high time that Islamabad fosters friendly ties with Moscow on the foundation of economic liberalism along with deftly exploring the areas of convergence in the strategic realm.

Pakistan needs to clearly identify and set its goals and targets. Disagreements of tariffs on North-South Gas Corridors should be reduced and the country needs to understand that this time, an economic partnership is being initiated which cannot be mistaken as large waivers and 'generous' amounts of aids that the US used to offer. Also, the Pak-Russia equation cannot be equated with Pakistan's relations with China either. Apparently and more realistically, tinting the Islamabad-Kremlin ties with economic liberalism can help save the complexities of regional and global geopolitics.

Foreign policymakers need to acknowledge the fact that the trust-deficit exists due to the historical baggage of the two countries. In fostering ties with Russia, Pakistan should not completely divorce politico-security dynamics/realities from economic cooperation. To serve this purpose, engaging Russia by means of "low politics" such as economic cooperation, cooperation in energy sector, cultural exchange, infrastructure development, exchange of technology and sharing of vital information and technology (while being cognisant of our national security interests) will help Pakistan and Russia to build confidence, address the issue of trust deficit between the two states and aid in developing a better symbiotic and strong bilateral relationship.

### **Policy Recommendations**

At this point, given the internal-external challenges that Pakistan confronts presently, the two countries' interests seem to be aligned to a great extent. In Afghanistan, Pak-US relations are on a constant downward spiral and, in this situation, Pakistan needs a voice that can resonate with its own. Pakistan sees Russia as its partner and reiterated its position at many levels. Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, visited Moscow and has been continuously working with his Russian counterpart towards fostering peace in Afghanistan. Other than this, Islamabad perceives Moscow as an important player in its foreign policy calculus and, in consonance with its traditional partner China, taking trilateral initiatives. However, on Pakistan's

part, any foreign policy direction which is based on the dictum of “pick a major power and wear it like an armour”<sup>19</sup> would hardly be productive. It is for Pakistan to analyse how it can prudently maximise its benefits and, in this regard, mentioned below are some important policy recommendations:

- i. Russia’s strength lies in all the post-soviet spaces and Central Asia, in particular, continues to be most significant for Moscow. The EAU, CSTO and SCO are some of the regional constructs, at the disposal of Russia, to keep a watch on Central Asia. Moreover, Russia is not going to leave this region unattended especially now when it is resurging. Pakistan in this bigger scheme of Eurasian can play an important role due to its central geostrategic location. In fostering long-term and ensuring partnership with Russia, Central Asia acquires a special place. Thus, forging good ties with Central Asia particularly in terms of economic cooperation and connectivity is very important.
- ii. In 2013, Pakistan and China entered into a mega connectivity project, CPEC, which the Russians and Central Asians also find as a useful possible conduit to the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian integration project. Therefore, it will be pertinent for Pakistan to create economic incentives for Russia, particularly in the CPEC. It will have a two-fold advantage: establishing a sound base for Pakistan-Russia economic cooperation and managing the Sino-Russia economic competition in Pakistan’s energy market.
- iii. The North-South gas pipeline is the flagship project of Pak-Russia economic cooperation; this project would connect LNG terminals of Karachi with Lahore from Karachi to Lahore. The Russian company, Gazprom, is also planning to construct a network of regional pipelines, one of them is Iran-Pakistan-India sub-sea gas pipeline. In October 2017, Russia offered India and Pakistan to develop an offshore pipeline that will pass through Gwadar port. Pakistan can diversify its energy mix by benefitting from the Russian expertise in the energy sector. Russia also needs an alternative market for its energy-related goods and services.

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<sup>19</sup> Ume Farwa, “Pakistan-Russia Relations Depend on a Crafty Balancing Act,” *Asia Times*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/can-pak-russian-relations-thrive-strategic-cooperation/>

The disagreement on the tariffs should be reduced and the country needs to understand that this time, an economic partnership is being initiated which is different from the large waivers and 'generous' amounts of aids that other great powers such as the US used to offer.

- iv. As an agrarian economy, Pakistan must work to increase its export of agricultural and dairy products to Russia. This should be a priority, especially now that the European imports are banned in Russia due to the EU sanctions after the Crimean Crisis. Pakistan can also work with Russia to expand and improve its storage and packaging facilities for such products.
- v. Bilateral cooperation has the potential to flourish extensively in the heavy industry. Pak Steel Mills is a case in point. Pakistan needs to avail itself of this opportunity.
- vi. Russia has already extended an invitation to the Pakistani business community to participate in the World Expo 2025. This offer was made in January 2018, when a Russian business delegation visited Pakistan. To benefit from this opportunity, Pakistan must prepare well for the Expo and the business community must be empowered to make suggestions on what products must be showcased at the Expo in order to substantially increase their future prospects and outlook.
- vii. For Islamabad, the inconsistent economic policies, lack of ease of doing business and political stability are obstacles to reach the desired level of bilateral cooperation with Russia. Pakistan is in dire need to put its house in order, only then it can maintain and sustain long-term relations with other country.
- viii. The US tilt towards India raised questions in Moscow but it did not completely pull away from New Delhi rather it opted for a more balanced approach towards South Asia. Russia's policy of balancing between Islamabad and New Delhi, at times, create complexities in the bilateral relation. Besides, India has always been a limiting factor in Russia's relations with Pakistan. Nevertheless, Islamabad

should not view its relations with Moscow from the prism of its ties with India.

- ix. The Russians and Chinese are complimenting each other in many areas however, Russia is moving fast on the security track and China on the economic one. This might create an unpredictable scenario if Beijing and Moscow are unable to reach mutual understanding. For this reason, it will be prudent for Islamabad to find a balance in its policy towards its traditional ally, Beijing, and its reluctant friend, Moscow. Too much eagerness or restraint can prove detrimental for Pakistan in the larger context of securing its interests and formulating a regional framework that can help Islamabad navigate through the chartered waters of the regional politics.

## **Conclusion**

The on-going conflict in Afghanistan, the declining US influence in the world, the persistent threat of trans-national terrorism to the states' sovereignty and territorial integrity have heightened the threat perceptions in the Kremlin. Facilitating peace in the region, working with India and Pakistan with a balancing approach are few of its preferred options. Regional stability has the same implications for both Russia and Pakistan. Afghanistan has become the theatre where the strategic interests of Russia and Pakistan are converging the most. This will be the main area of long-term engagement between the two countries. Terrorism, narco-trafficking, economic development, projects of the Eurasian integration and cooperation in the multilateral institutions such as SCO will also call for close cooperation. In fact, Moscow is trying to foster a broad-based partnership with Pakistan. Russia's vision in South Asia is very clear, so, Pakistan needs to fine-tune its strategic vision. In future, Pak-Russia relations are going to be beneficial for both countries if a stable and well-thought-out approach is followed.

The prospects of flourishing bilateral ties warrant an intensive dialogue between civil, military and economic institutions. Maintaining continuous dialogues will ensure transparency and confidence between the former Cold War rivals. The burgeoning relationship can benefit both countries but there are many impediments in sustaining the cordial cooperation. The

baggage of history has marred the bilateral distrust and in the Russian strategic quarters, this question is still asked whether Pakistan may become overly reliant on the US once again. On the other hand, Moscow does not want to either lose its 'privileged' strategic partner India nor provoke its sensitivities. So, Pakistan should follow a cautious approach and revisit its policy to give more consideration to economic liberalism for a long-term relationship with Russia