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Issue Brief

Pakistan-Russia Strategic Partnership: New Horizons for Cooperation

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Pakistan and Russia have never enjoyed a healthy relationship in their past. The Cold War period was a turbulent time for both states. There were many exchanges of official visits from both sides, but they were not long lasting. After the dismemberment of USSR in 1991, both sides tried again to establish good bilateral relations. In 1999, the visit of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Russia significantly assisted in breaking the ice and starting a new episode of bilateral relations. Russian President Boris Yeltsin termed it as a “new chapter in relations between the two countries oriented into the 21st century.”¹ Later on, the visit of ISI Chief, General Mehmood, as President Musharraf's special envoy, in 2001, brought a major shift in bilateral relations. The agreement made for the sale of sixteen MI-17 military cargo helicopters to Pakistan is evidence of that shift.²

A new era of Pakistan-Russia bilateral dialogue started during President Parvez Musharraf's visit to Russia in 2003. This visit was a milestone between both states which opened new horizons for cooperation. In response to improved relations with Pakistan, Russia supported Pakistan's entry to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer. Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Fradkov's visit to Pakistan in 2007 further helped in enhancing bilateral relations and economic cooperation. Two years later, in 2009 Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani visited Moscow also helped bolster relations. During the visit of President Asif Ali Zardari to Russia in 2011, the two countries signed MoUs in energy, investment, air services and agriculture.³ Russia waved its embargo on arms supplies to Pakistan in June 2014 and signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement with Pakistan in November 2014.⁴

Both states have also conducted joint military exercises during the last five years. After the successful completion of two naval exercises, “Arabian Monsoon – 2014” and “Arabian Monsoon – 2015,” Pakistan and Russia have also conducted live military exercises named “Druzhiba-2016” (Friendship-2016) in

¹ Muhammad Hanif, " Pakistan-Russia Relations: Progress, Prospects and Constraints," *IPRI Journal*, XIII, no. 2, Summer 2013, p.71.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.74.

⁴ Shah Rukh Hashmi, " Russia seeks out new win-win relationship with Pakistan," *Russia Direct*, February 02, 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/russia-seeks-out-new-win-win-relationship-pakistan>, Accessed on November 21, 2016.

Pakistan's province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, with combat troops, having the task of eliminating non-state actors and other combat and training tasks in mountainous areas.⁵

In 2015, Moscow agreed to sell four Mi-35M helicopters to Pakistan and welcomed Islamabad to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁶ In addition, Pakistan finalised a deal in 2015 with Russia to import Klimov RD-93 engines for the JF-17 aircraft it jointly manufactures with China.⁷ Furthermore, Pakistan is currently negotiating with Russia on a deal for Su-35 and Su-37 jets and also exploring the obtaining of a range of other Russian defence hardware, including the Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft.⁸ Russia has lauded Pakistan's efforts against terrorism and it has offered counter-terrorism equipment to Pakistan and cooperation in fighting terrorism and radicalism.

To enhance economic ties, both countries are close to finalizing a \$2-2.5 billion pipeline deal that would transmit natural gas from the port city of Karachi to Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city. Additionally, Russia has provided aid in the following projects as well: the expansion of steel mill at Karachi, improvement of Heavy Mechanical Complex in Taxila and expansion of Guddu and Muzaffargarh power plants, and development of Thar coal project. Russia may also join Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the CASA-1000 energy project, providing Afghanistan and Pakistan with electricity.

The current geo-political and regional environment appears to be quite favourable to the advancement of Pakistan-Russia relations. There are various zones which could be mutually advantageous to cooperate in the geo-economic, military and regional politico-strategic and security areas. Russia has shown interest in investing in Pakistan in the fields of technology, drip irrigation, desert farming and agriculture. Russian exports to Pakistan are only 1%, and Pakistan's exports to Russia are 0.06%. A strong economic trade can further enhance their trust and will open various venues for cooperation. Pakistan can export its products to the Russian market. For this, a robust policy needs to be in place to attract the

⁵ Petr Topychkanov, "India Feels Threatened by growing Russia-Pakistan Military Ties – Expert," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, October 13, 2016, http://rbth.com/opinion/2016/10/13/india-feels-threatened-by-growing-russia-pakistan-military-ties-expert_638423, Accessed on November 30, 2016.

⁶ Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "What's Behind Russia's Rapprochement With Pakistan?," *The Diplomat*, May 14, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/whats-behind-russias-rapprochement-with-pakistan/>, Accessed on November 14, 2016.

⁷ Arif Rafiq, "Pakistan: Russia's New Best Friend?" *The National Interest*, September 27, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/pakistan-russias-new-best-friend-13945?page=5>, Accessed on November 11, 2016.

⁸ "Pakistan, Russia Negotiating Deal on Russian Su-35, Su-37 Jets," *SPUTNIK News*, August 09, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201609081045073021-pakistan-russia-negotiating-fightersu-jets/>, Accessed on November 29, 2016.

Russian market. There are prospects of raising the bilateral trade to 3-4 billion USD.⁹ Pakistan has allowed Russia to use the Gwadar Port for its exports as Moscow has also shown inclination to be part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Gwadar Port will be a game changer as among other things, it will provide a chance to Pakistan, China and Russia and build a strong regional alliance.

Education sector could be an interesting point between both states. Pakistani students can take benefits of advanced science and technology education in Russia. Cooperation in education is an opportunity to develop people to people contacts. Exchange of scholars and sending Pakistani scientists to Russia and Russian scientists to Pakistan will promote bilateral cooperation. Currently, there are less than 500 Pakistani students in Russian universities.

During the last few years, both states have realised that good and healthy relationships are in the best interests of both sides. Pakistan's geo-strategic location makes it very attractive for global powers. China's engagement in Gwadar Port has enhanced Pakistan's position globally. Russia can also take benefit of this port. In return, Pakistan can also take advantage of Russian military technology.

Pakistan and Russia have to restart their bilateral relationship by making long lasting and unconditional agreements for their best interests. However, there are some important steps they should take in this regard:

- Taking necessary steps to strengthen strategic partnership. Increasing joint military exercises.
- Increasing bilateral trade volume. Business counselling centres can be established to educate about both sides markets' needs and demands.
- Exchange of scholars and scientists.
- Cultural exchange programmes and people to people contacts.
- Increasing tourism.

A Pakistan and Russia strategic partnership will have significant results for both states, as well as for the region. Russia has a vital position in global diplomacy, and a strong relationship with Russia would be

⁹ Guest Lecture by Dr. Azmat Hayat Khan on "Pakistan-Russia Relations: Opportunities and Challenges" March 26, 2015, IPRI Islamabad, <http://www.ipripak.org/guest-lecture-on-pakistan-russia-relations-opportunities-and-challenges-by-dr-azmat-hayat-khan/>, Accessed on November 28, 2016.

favourable to Pakistan. Russia's access to Gwadar Port will provide further economic opportunities which will strengthen the Russian economy. Russia must take the advantage of the benefits of a strategic partnership and both states should trust each other for further cooperation.