



LAVROV'S VISIT: TAKING PAKISTAN- RUSSIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS TO NEW HEIGHTS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On April 7, 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov concluded his two-day visit to Pakistan after his arrival in the country on April 6, 2021.¹ Lavrov's visit to Islamabad was preceded by his visit to New Delhi. While in Islamabad, the Russian Foreign Minister was accompanied by the Russian President's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Ambassador Zamir Kabulov as well.

Delegation-level talks were held between the Russian and Pakistani sides with the foreign ministers of both countries heading their respective delegations. The Russian Foreign Minister also met with the Prime Minister of Pakistan as well as the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) during his visit.²

Ambassador Zamir Kabulov also had a separate meeting with his Pakistani counterpart Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq to discuss the Afghan Peace Process, the developments made in the intra-Afghan dialogue and to further increase cooperation to facilitate peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The most important fact of the Russian Foreign Minister's visit to South Asia this time was that this visit was his first to Pakistan in nine years. The visit indicates a uniform ascent in Pakistan-Russia relations.

Lavrov's Pakistan visit commenced positively and concluded with bright prospects for the future of relations between Pakistan and Russia. During his press briefing with the Pakistani Foreign Minister

¹ Ayaz Gul, "Russia's Lavrov in Pakistan to Discuss Bilateral Ties, Afghan Peace", *Voice of America*, published on April 6, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/russias-lavrov-pakistan-discuss-bilateral-ties-afghan-peace>

² News Desk, "Russian FM Lavrov meets Pakistani PM in search of Afghan peace", *English Al-Arabiya*, published on April 7, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/04/07/Russian-FM-Lavrov-meets-Pakistani-PM-in-search-of-Afghan-peace>

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Mr. Lavrov expressed his satisfaction on the 'constructive and mutually beneficial' nature of Pak-Russia relations. The Russian Foreign Minister gave credit to the Inter-Governmental Commission (which will be conducted later this year) for its efforts that resulted in the increase of mutual trade up to 45% and which hit the record high of US\$ 790 million.³

While discussing cooperation in the energy sector, the Russian FM stated that it is ready to start construction of the North-South Gas Pipeline project (also known as Pakistan-Stream Project) as soon as details are finalised.

Moreover, Mr. Lavrov not only acknowledged but also appreciated Pakistan's efforts and successes in counter-terrorism (CT), stated Russia's readiness to boost Pakistan's CT potential and even offered 'special military equipment' to this end. He mentioned that besides DRUZHBA CT exercises, AMAN and Arabian Monsoon maritime exercises, Russia is ready to further deepen military and strategic cooperation with Pakistan.

Lavrov displayed content over Pak-Russia convergence and coordination of views in different international multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). He appreciated Pakistan's efforts since its membership in the SCO, especially in the anti-terrorism structure.

While addressing the prevailing COVID situation, Mr. Lavrov stated that Russia has already supplied Pakistan with fifty-thousand doses of anti-COVID vaccine (Sputnik-V) and will supply a hundred and fifty-thousand more soon. He expressed interest in the local production of the vaccine which can be a "promising area of cooperation".

The Russian Foreign Minister's remarks were reciprocated with equal zest and fervour by the Pakistani side. The Russian FM was assured that Pakistan was desirous to build a multi-dimensional relationship with his country, which is grounded in a new approach and mind-set towards Russia. There was agreement with Mr. Lavrov's assessment of diversifying commercial activities and increasing economic cooperation sustainably.

The Pakistani side clearly stated that it was serious in the execution of the North-South Gas Pipeline project because it was the net beneficiary of it since Pakistan is an energy deficient country.

³ Sana Jamal, "Pakistan, Russia agree to build economic, energy and defence ties", *Gulf News*, published on April 07, 2021. <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-russia-agree-to-build-economic-energy-and-defence-ties-1.78395748>

Besides seeing eye-to-eye on the Afghan Peace Process and cooperation in defence and counter-terrorism domains, the Pakistani side reiterated its commitment to multilateralism, respect for sovereignty and resolution of issues through dialogue and negotiations that it shares with Russia.

In addition to the nature and agenda, the timing of this visit was of the essence as well. The Russian FM's visit to Pakistan came at a time when there is a growing convergence of interests on multiple matters of regional and global importance between Pakistan and Russia. Significant changes are taking place in strategic alignments within the region and most significantly, the United States' (US) unconditional withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Given the contemporary uncertain situation in Afghanistan; India's newfound bonhomie and growing military and strategic relations with the US and the United States' policies of 'containing China', combined with its resolve to punish Russia for its 'transgressions' have persuaded Russia to change its policy orientation in order to protect its interest and influence in the international arena, particularly in South Asia. Lavrov's visit to Pakistan is an indication of a subtle shift in Russian policy towards the region in general and Pakistan in particular. In a display of pragmatic assessment, Russia has realized that it needs to take a leading role in Afghanistan as the US gears up to leave.

India's closeness with the US, while also seeking to maintain its relations with Russia have also made the latter realize that changes in its policy orientation are pertinent and to this end, improving bilateral ties with Pakistan and China (both of whom share strong strategic relations with one another along with rivalry with Russia) are imperative.

Due to the negative historical baggage between Pakistan and Russia, it is natural that things move at a considerable slow pace, but indications are extremely promising for improvement of Pak-Russia relations. This time around, it is clear that Russia is serious in cementing ties with Pakistan and enhancing the status of its bilateral relations with the country.

Pakistan on the other hand has also displayed genuine willingness of bolstering relations with Russia. Both countries are now conducting talks for exporting Russian LNG (liquefied natural gas) to Pakistan. Discussion on cooperation in the non-energy fields such as the use of nuclear energy in the medical field as well as the industrial sector are also under consideration for the upcoming IGC meeting this year.

Pakistan has also identified different sectors for Russia to invest in and provide its expertise to Pakistan such as infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture and railways which will not only attract

investment from Russian companies in Pakistan, improve commercial ties, boost confidence but it is also in line with and reinforce Pakistan's policy shift to geo-economics.

Lavrov's visit to Pakistan was a significant development in Pakistan-Russia relations which has definitely provided impetus for building up on the current momentum and take the bilateral relations between two former rivals to strategic level that will reap dividends not just for the two countries involved but for the entire region.

Policymakers and political elite of both countries must now move to capitalize on this opportunity and harness the maximum potential of this relationship based on building trust and mutual respect.