

NEARING 30 YEARS OF PAKISTAN-BELARUS RELATIONS: AN ASSESSMENT

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



The 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Belarus, on 3 February 2024, marks a significant milestone. Plans are afoot to commemorate this occasion through joint events in Islamabad and Minsk, underscoring the importance of bilateral ties. To lend substance to the celebrations, it is proposed that both countries undertake tangible steps to further strengthen bilateral relations, with a particular emphasis on economic collaboration.

2023-2025 will witness the signing of a roadmap aimed at enhancing trade between the two countries. Remarkably, the first five months of 2023 saw a 30% increase in mutual trade, with Belarusian exports to Pakistan surging by 1.5 times compared to the previous year.¹

Concurrently, Pakistan is endeavouring to augment its exports to reach a target of US\$100 billion under its ambitious "Vision Pakistan: Road to \$100 billion Exports" strategy.² This initiative aligns with Pakistan's broader objective of transitioning towards a geo-economic paradigm, as outlined in its National Security Policy (NSP). Thus, economic cooperation with Belarus could play a crucial role in enabling Pakistan to promote these goals effectively.

1 "Belarus, Pakistan plan to sign roadmap to increase trade in 2023-2025", BelITA, published on July 27, 2023.

https://www.belarus.by/en/business/business-news/belarus-pakistan-plan-to-sign-roadmap-to-increase-trade-in-2023-2025_i_0000158978.html

2 Zafar Bhutta, "IAC maps path to \$100 billion exports", The Express Tribune, published on December 08, 2023.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2449296/iac-maps-path-to-100-billion-exports>

In the wake of geopolitical shifts post-February 24, 2022, Belarus is actively seeking economic partners and new markets. Pakistan, being the fifth most populous country globally, holds significant potential as a long-term economic ally, capable of establishing a mutually beneficial economic relationship.

The current global landscape of international relations is characterized by rapid changes, driven by factors such as shifting alliances, the emergence of new powers, economic uncertainties, geopolitical conflicts, and transformative global events. This necessitates a dynamic approach to foreign policy and strategy, adapting to new challenges and seizing emerging opportunities. This may involve reassessing trade agreements, security alliances, diplomatic engagements, and environmental commitments.

Belarus and Pakistan, in this turbulent international milieu, are recalibrating their foreign policies to bolster bilateral cooperation while addressing both internal and external challenges.

Political, Economic, Diplomatic & Military Cooperation:

Diplomatic, economic, political and military cooperation between the two countries has evolved significantly since the early 1990s. Following Pakistan's recognition of Belarus in December 1991, diplomatic relations were formally established on February 3, 1994.³

However, the establishment of resident diplomatic missions only occurred two decades later, with Belarus opening its mission in Islamabad in July 2014 and Pakistan reciprocating in Minsk in August 2015.

This development coincided with a thaw in Pakistan-Russia relations, particularly after Russia lifted its arms embargo against Pakistan in June 2014.⁴

Since the establishment of resident diplomatic missions, bilateral relations have flourished steadily. High-level state visits and official exchanges underscore the commitment to deepening cooperation. Notable among these are the historic visits by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (2015 and 2016) and Prime Minister Andrei Kobyakov to Pakistan (2015), and reciprocal visits by Pakistani

³ "Overview of Pakistan-Belarus Bilateral Relations", Embassy of Pakistan Minsk – Belarus, accessed on December 02, 2023.

<https://pakembminsk.org/bilateral-relations/#:~:text=Overview%20of%20Pakistan,July%202014%20and%20the>

⁴ "Russia lifts arms embargo to Pakistan: Report", DAWN, published on June 02, 2014. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1110131>

leaders, including Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (2015) and Chairman of the Senate Mian Raza Rabbani (2017).

The most recent high-level engagement was the visit of Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik to Pakistan in May 2023.⁵

On the international stage, Pakistan and Belarus closely engage in different multilateral forums, including the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). High-level interactions, such as the meetings between the Pakistani Prime Minister and the Belarusian President, emphasize the strategic importance placed on these relations.

Moreover, to formalize and strengthen the bilateral relationship, several agreements and declarations have been signed, including:

- Islamabad Declaration of Pakistan-Belarus Partnership (May 29, 2015)
- Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (August 10, 2015)

Institutional mechanisms such as the Pakistan-Belarus Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, established in 2015, have facilitated the development of bilateral trade and economic activities. Additionally, various joint working groups and forums have been created to enhance cooperation in sectors like industry, agriculture, science and technology, and to institutionalize business-to-business collaborations.

Despite these efforts, the trade volume between the two countries, as of 2019, stood at US\$50.2 million⁶ (See Figure 1), with the balance of trade favouring Belarus.

⁵ “Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus S. Aleinik meets the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, published on May 30, 2023. https://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/f4bd6cb6687653b6.html

⁶ “Trade and Economic Relations of the Republic of Belarus and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan”, Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, accessed on November 30, 2023. https://pakistan.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/trade_economic/#:~:text=Trade%20and%20Economic-,Trade%20and%20Economic%20Relations%20of%20the%20Republic%20of%20Belarus%20and,65%20million%20dollars%20a%20year.

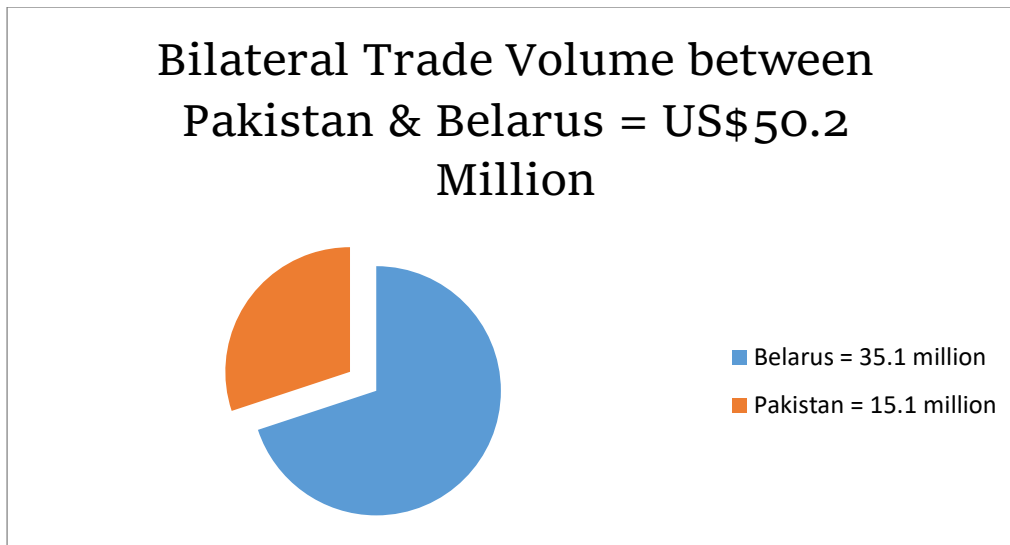


Figure 1 (Bilateral Trade between Pakistan & Belarus)

Belarusian exports to Pakistan have predominantly included tractors, fertilizers, defence equipment, and machinery, while Pakistan's exports have largely consisted of textiles, food products, and medical instruments.⁷ (See Figure 2)

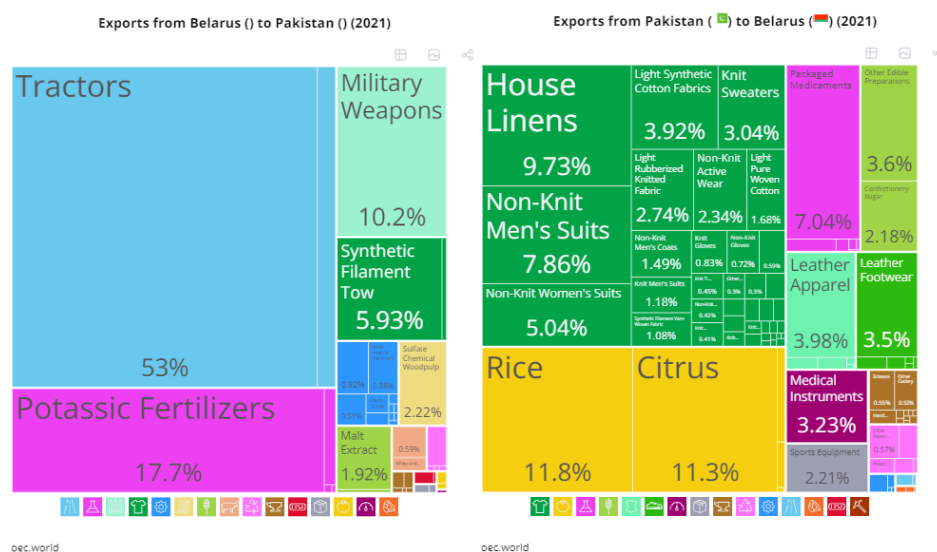


Figure 2 (Export-Import Data between Pakistan & Belarus)

According to U.N. COMTRADE data updated in December 2023, the bilateral trade volume for 2022 was US\$18.4 million, a significant decrease from the previous year. (See Figure 3)

⁷ "Belarus-Pakistan International Trade Profile", The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), accessed on December 05, 2023.
<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/blr/partner/pak>

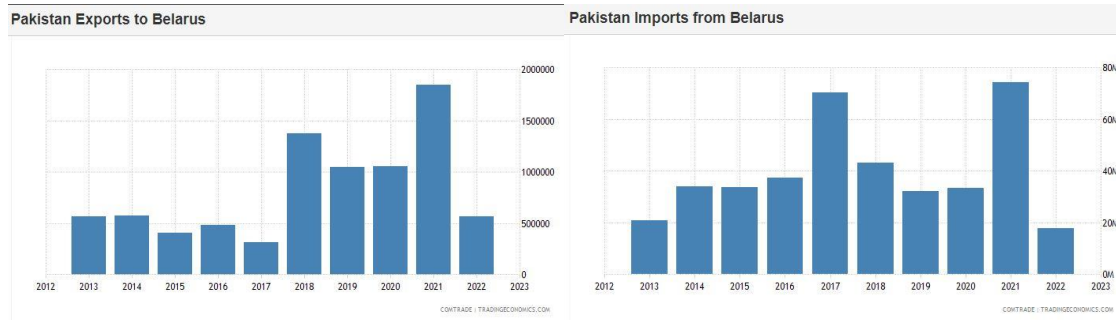


Figure 3 (Bilateral Trade per annum between Pakistan & Belarus)^{8 9}

This decline can be attributed to Western economic sanctions against Russia and Belarus following the Ukraine conflict and Pakistan's economic challenges, including dwindling U.S. dollar reserves and currency devaluation.

The ambitious target set during the Fifth Session of the Pakistan-Belarus Joint Economic Commission in 2017, aiming to elevate bilateral trade to US\$1 billion, remains unmet.¹⁰ This shortfall highlights the impact of external economic sanctions and internal economic challenges faced by both nations.

What Next? Steps to Enhance bilateral cooperation:

Looking ahead, it is imperative to focus on multiple domains to enhance bilateral cooperation. Strategies should include establishing new or strengthening existing bilateral trade agreements, organizing business delegations and expos, promoting joint ventures and investments, encouraging cultural and educational exchanges, collaborating on infrastructure projects, engaging in technology transfer and shared research, implementing trade facilitation measures, coordinating policies and dialogues, establishing financial cooperation, promoting tourism, and cooperating in the agricultural and energy sectors.

Military-to-military and military-technical cooperation also presents significant opportunities for economic collaboration.

Recent years have seen a strengthening in military-to-military cooperation, underscored by the establishment and meetings of the military technical committee. This development not only deepens defence relations but also enhances shared strategic insights. Such military engagements

⁸ "Pakistan Exports to Belarus-2022", Trading Economics, accessed on December 05, 2023. <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/exports/belarus>

⁹ "Pakistan Imports from Belarus-2022", Trading Economics, accessed on December 05, 2023. <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/imports/belarus>

¹⁰ "Fifth Session of Pakistan-Belarus Joint Economic Commission, Grodno Belarus", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, published on November 17, 2017. <https://mofa.gov.pk/fifth-session-of-pakistan-belarus-joint-economic-commission-grodno-belarus/>

are complemented by educational and research collaborations, notably the Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) between the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and both the Belarusian State University (BSU) and the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR), fostering a partnership in research and education.

Despite the presence of necessary institutional mechanisms and political will, both nations face challenges due to internal dynamics and the volatile global geopolitical climate. Consistent policy implementation, expanding industrial bases, exploring new market opportunities, effectively utilizing existing agreements, and fostering academic, cultural, and educational exchanges are crucial.

Private sector involvement and public-private partnerships are key to enhancing economic cooperation. In light of the dynamic and contentious period in international affairs, strong diplomatic relations and regular government-to-government communication are essential. Mechanisms like the Bilateral Political Consultations (BPC) and Inter-Parliamentary and Inter-Regional Cooperation should be leveraged to align policies and reach consensus on various issues, ensuring regular appraisal of bilateral relations and exploring new means to strengthen them.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the potential in Pakistan-Belarus bilateral relations, particularly in the economic domain, is immense. The relationship has evolved positively, underpinned by a mutual commitment to enhancing cooperation across various sectors. High-level visits and agreements have cemented this partnership, fostering a growing collaboration and optimism for future joint endeavours. Both nations continue to explore new avenues for cooperation and mutual growth, recognizing the potential benefits of such collaboration.