

FULFILLING ONE'S DESIRE TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONS: RUSSIA-PAKISTAN COOPERATION AFTER THE 9TH IGC

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do
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A New Page?

The late 2024 must have imbued the persons concerned with enthusiasm and excitement – the 9th Session of the Russia-Pakistan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, hosted in Moscow on 2-4 December, produced so many promising statements that some analysts have already considered that to be a critical milestone in bilateral relations.¹

They could have grounds for that indeed – the discussed agenda encompassed such a wide range of issues that one could start thinking over a new page in the history of interaction between Moscow and Islamabad. The agenda included:

- Energy cooperation (oil supplies on a regular basis and investments in Pakistani refineries);
- Connectivity and logistics (Pakistan's involvement in the INSTC and prospects of practical engagements);
- Industrial cooperation (prospects of Russian investments in revitalizing Karachi Steel Mills)
- Cooperation on pharmaceuticals (localization of insulin production in Pakistan);

¹ Zamir Ahmed Awan, "Pakistan and Russia Chart a New Course for Collaboration", RIAC (Russian International Affairs Council), published on December 6, 2024.
<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/zamir-ahmed-awan/pakistan-and-russia-chart-a-new-course-for-collaboration/>

- Trade cooperation (signed MoU between Moscow Expo Center and Trade Development Authority of Pakistan); and
- Cooperation in education (signed MoUs between Russian and Pakistani universities).²

These discussions could bring optimism to any political analyst, observing Russian relations with the Global South, but for those concentrating on Russo-Pakistan ties they seem to be of much more significance, given the current landscape of bilateral cooperation.

Better Late than Never

Russian policies towards South Asia have long been India-centered due to historical, political, and economic reasons. Since the start of open confrontation with the West in 2014 we could see a gradual transformation in Moscow's attitudes towards the subcontinent. It should be highlighted here that the case is not about changing priorities (India is certain to stay as a Russian most privileged strategic partner), but about comprehensiveness – Moscow is interested in developing ties with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka so as not to rely on India alone and have better representation in the whole subcontinent.

One can witness a rising interest in Pakistan in all dimensions. Politically, Russian leadership wants to cement ties with the fifth most-populous nation in the world, one of the Islamic world leaders, and an important factor in the Global South.

Economically, it wants to explore new markets and diversify trade ties (so as not to depend primarily on China, India, Türkiye, and UAE). And Russia-Pakistan economic cooperation in effect saw some major successes - since 2014 the trade turnover increased from 450 million dollars to 1.1 billion dollars in 2023³. Energy cooperation saw contracts on constructing the Karachi-Lahore pipeline as well as numerous tranches of oil supplies.

The security field is also of interest because Pakistan seems to be the best partner for cooperating on the Afghan issue – the latter is of existential importance for Russia as there is always the risk of

² "The 9th meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was held", Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, published on December 4, 2024.

<https://www.minenergo.gov.ru/?news-item=sostoyalos-9-e-zasedanie-mezhpravitelstvennoy-komissii-po-sotrudnichestvu-mezhdu-rossiyskoy-federats>

³ "The 9th meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was held", RusCable.ru, published on December 5, 2024.
https://www.ruscable.ru/news/2024/12/05/Sostoyalosy_9-e_zasedanie_Mezhpravitelystvennoj_ko/

instability spillover into the Central Asian republics. Afghan track in fact proved that Russia and Pakistan could collaborate on security issues.

Nearing the Glass Ceiling

Despite all these achievements, several structural limitations are still in place. First, it concerns the security field in general and defence cooperation in particular. There is a need for Moscow to think twice before cooperating with Islamabad on any security issue since it could bring concerns to New Delhi and raise unpleasant discussions within the Indo-Russian dialogue. Nevertheless, all the existing formats on dealing with Afghanistan and counterterrorism (including Druzhba drills) should be maintained and further facilitated.

Economically, limitations derive from little knowledge of markets (for both sides), difficulties in payments, and lack of free financial resources. As a result, despite some achievements in numbers, the Russia-Pakistan trade did not meet success in substance – so far; it lacks capital goods that could elevate the partnership to a strategic level. Consequently, if the parties concerned wish to launch any kind of project, this enterprise should be long-term, complementary in macroeconomic terms, and, finally, certain to produce benefits for both sides.

Thus, with security concerns set aside for the time being, economic cooperation appears to be a more viable avenue for strengthening Russia-Pakistan relations. The critical question remains whether the proposed initiatives will yield tangible outcomes.

So Many Questions Ahead

Collaboration in the energy sector is likely to meet all the above-mentioned requirements – long-term demand for oil and gas from Pakistani side is certain to grow further, it is fully complementary as well as beneficial for both sides.

At the same time, one should remember that any protocol or MoU is not a contract. It is contracts that we should analyze and make conclusions about any prospects for a breakthrough. To be precise, one needs to know at least the price, planned volumes for supplies as well as payment mechanisms. Moreover, it is still unclear how Pakistani refineries tend to handle Russian oil. Proclaimed plans to invest into their repairing first delay materialization of regular supplies for another period.

Nevertheless, even declared goals give hope for further development of Russia-Pakistan relations – those objectives demonstrate that Moscow and Islamabad have finally touched upon something of a strategic nature that could boost cooperation qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

Conclusion

Hence, the 9th Session of the Russia-Pakistan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation laid the basis for Russia and Pakistan to take another step towards genuinely substantive cooperation. Such pushes were of pressing need a long time ago since the parties concerned approached a glass ceiling, limiting further development of bilateral collaboration.

Successful implementation of the highlighted initiatives – primarily, in the energy sector – could be a start for unveiling the vast potential of Russia-Pakistan ties that have been discussed for so long. The realization of these plans is likely to lead Russia and Pakistan to the pathways of strategic partnership..