



Pakistan-Russia Relations: Future Prospects

By

Aamir Iqbal

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AAMIR IQBAL*

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union were established in 1949 at the very beginning of the Cold War when rivalry for global dominance was at its peak between the United States and the Soviet Union. The US-Soviet global power competition in the cold war era presented a complex political environment in which both Pakistan and the Soviet Union could not build cordial and cooperative bilateral relations. Their relations saw many ups and downs with the changing global political structure and international order. However, leaving the past behind, Pakistan and Russia are heading towards friendly relations and diversifying their areas of cooperation for mutual benefits realising the changing global and regional dynamics.

Historical Background of Bilateral Relations

Cordial relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union could not develop after the defence partnership of Pakistan with the United States in the 1950s onwards. At the time, the world was divided into two blocs, the US and the Soviet Union were both involved in intense competition to promote their ideologies and increase their spheres of influence over the world. The very first positive move in relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union was the signing of an agreement on the oil trade in 1960. In the 1965 Indo-Pak war, the Soviet Union successfully mediated between the warring parties at Tashkent which brought an end to the war. In January 1971, Pakistan and the Soviet Union signed a landmark agreement under which the Soviet Union agreed to provide Pakistan with techno-financial assistance for the establishment of a steel mill in Karachi. Pakistan's Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited the Soviet Union in 1972 in an attempt to normalise the relationship between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. However, Pakistan's relations with the Soviet Union remained hostile from 1979 till 1988 when the Soviet Union started to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. A new phase in the relationship between the two countries was ushered in when the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Russian Federation was established in December 1991.

* Aamir Iqbal is an Intern at IRS.

Relations in the Post-Cold War Era

In the Post-cold war era and the first year of the existence of the Russian Federation (1992), Pakistan's then Foreign Minister Sardar Asif Ahmad Ali and Secretary-General Akram Zaki visited Moscow, followed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit in 1999 in which prospects of economic cooperation were discussed and a joint commission to promote trade and economic cooperation between the two countries was formed. Although this was regarded as a sign of a new beginning, no major positive signal was seen to ease the historical burden in the relationship.

Relations in the Post-9/11 Era

Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf's visit in February 2003 paved the way for more institutionalised cooperation between the two countries. Joint Working Groups on the issues of counterterrorism, strategic stability, and economic and cultural cooperation were established. In April 2007, Mikhail Fradkov was the first Russian Prime Minister to visit Pakistan. Moreover, in 2011, President Asif Ali Zardari visited Russia and in October 2012, Moscow sent its Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, when President Putin's trip to Islamabad got postponed due to scheduling issues. High-level visits of both Pakistani and Russian military and civil officials continued throughout 2013. After the Pakistani army chief visited Moscow, the Russian military and air chiefs paid visits to Islamabad to enhance defence cooperation. However, all these measures did not achieve any breakthrough in the Pak-Russia bilateral ties.

Moreover, Pakistan facilitated Russia's entry as an observer state into the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), and Russia reciprocated by helping Pakistan have an observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which later on led to the start of accession procedures to full membership in 2017. Russia has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the up-gradation of a major steel mill in Pakistan and has expressed interest in the new strategic energy pipelines, of which the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI) and the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (IPI) are major examples. As a result, annual Russia-Pakistan bilateral trade has grown up to half a billion dollars. The warming up in relations with Pakistan could not, however, disrupt Russia's defence equipment sales to India and Russia continued to support India's case for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

Further, the visit of Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu to Islamabad on 21 November 2014 and the signing of a deal on military cooperation was termed as a milestone development by Pakistan's Ministry of Defence. The agreement provides the exchange of information on politico-military issues, cooperation in promoting international security, an intensification of counter-terrorism and arms-control activities, the strengthening of collaboration in various military fields, and sharing experiences in peacekeeping operations.

Prospects of Bilateral Relations in the Backdrop of Russian Foreign Minister's Visit

The recently concluded visit of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Islamabad on 6-7 April 2021 outlined new avenues in the Pak-Russia bilateral Relations. For the first time in history, both the states have agreed to look beyond the defence and strategic ties and explore new areas of mutual interests and cooperation. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, in a joint press conference after the delegation-level talks along with his counterpart, announced multidimensional bilateral relations. He enunciated Pakistan's new approach and mindset towards deepening relations and creating win-win cooperation with the Russian Federation. On the other hand, the Russian foreign minister urged to diversify the bilateral relations and to make it constructive and mutually beneficial for both states.

Both the foreign ministers agreed to further cooperation in the mutual areas of interests such as the Afghan peace talks, counter-terrorism measures, cooperation on the international forums such as United Nations and SCO etc., a resolution to the Palestine issue, regional stability in South Asia, the Middle East, Asia Pacific, and the use of nuclear energy for industrial purposes. Moreover, Russia has offered its cooperation in defence, equipment for counterterrorism, energy sector, assistance in uplifting the railway infrastructure and revival of the steel mills. Furthermore, the proposed north-south gas pipeline between Lahore and Karachi with the cooperation of Russia came under consideration as well during the delegation-level meeting to address Pakistan's needs in the energy sector. In addition, to contain and mitigate the Covid-19 global pandemic, the purchase of the Russian vaccine providing technical assistance to Pakistan in its local production was also on the agenda.

To materialise and institutionalise cooperation and collaboration in the said areas, both the countries have agreed to convene an Intergovernmental Commission in Moscow this year. All the agreed goals and aspirations of both the countries to boost bilateral relations sound well and cover almost all the areas, such as defence, diplomatic, energy, infrastructure, and economic domains that set prospects for strong and cordial ties and constructive engagement of both the states. The agreed goals, if materialise will bring a pleasant bilateral relation beneficial not only for Pakistan but will reward Russia and the South Asian region as a whole.

This change in relations can be attributed to the changing views of Moscow about Pakistan after 2010. This was the time when Pakistan also started looking for other allies after feeling alienated by the dismissive treatment of the US in the war on terror in Afghanistan. The US was getting closer to India and Pakistan increased strategic ties with China. Moscow was watching the changing geopolitical situation and so it found common challenges and opportunities for furthering cooperation with Pakistan.

The growing US-India nexus and the strategic alliance could trigger reactions and new arrangements in the region. India has been a close friend of Russia and a major market for arms sales for long. However, in contemporary world politics, India is moving closer towards the US and acting as an agent of the Super Power (US) to contain China. More importantly, India went away from its nonalignment and joined the Quad under the leadership of the US, which is a matter of concern for the Russian leadership. Moreover, Russia wants to seize the opportunity and intends to play a leading role in South Asia after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Both Russia and Pakistan share the desire for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Russia is playing an important role to facilitate the Afghan peace talks while engaging all the key actors including Pakistan.

All these changing political patterns forced the Russian leadership to review their South Asia policy and to play a more balanced role in South Asian politics. Russia is now trying to have close ties with Pakistan as well by considering it a major actor in South Asia. From Pakistan's point of view, the change can be attributed to a shift in Pakistan's foreign policy from geo-strategy to geo-economics, its mounting needs in the energy sector, trade and economic cooperation, and requirement of technical assistance, especially to revive the steel mill. In addition, Pakistan is pursuing a balanced approach towards major powers and is committed to having cordial relations with all the great powers based on mutual gain. As the world is quickly moving towards geo-economics from geostrategy, Pakistan also realises the change and tries to diversify its relations with the world's major powers. Pakistan and Russia now plan to go beyond defence cooperation and are aiming to have cooperation in other areas such as energy, infrastructure, agriculture, and industrial sectors along with defence to further strengthen their ties for mutual benefit.

Conclusion

Pakistan-Russia relations have entered a new historical phase realising their importance and the need for cooperation with one another. Both the states are trying to look past the baggage of history to move forward with a new zeal and zest. Prospects of their bilateral ties are going to cover other sectors in addition to defence. Both the states have agreed to concentrate on collaboration in the economic, infrastructure, and energy sectors. Great mutual trust and cooperation can be anticipated after the recently concluded visit of the Russian foreign minister to Islamabad on 6-7 April 2021, where both states have agreed to enhance their cooperation based on mutual gains. However, both the states should be vigilant about the changing regional and global political and strategic dynamics, especially in the post-US withdrawal scenario that can pose challenges to their future cordial ties. As witnessed in the past, relations between both states got upset because of their changing interests and priorities

in the backdrop of global and regional political shifts. From the Pakistan side, a balanced and neutral foreign policy towards the two major powers, the US and Russia, and from the Russia perspective, a balanced approach towards Pakistan and India would be a challenge to overcome for materialising their plans of good bilateral relations. So, if both the states remained firm on the recently agreed plans and commitments, there are a lot of hopes and opportunities for mutually beneficial Pak-Russia cordial relations.

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