

PAKISTAN-RUSSIA RAPPROCHEMENT AND CURRENT GEO-POLITICS

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Abstract

The trend of improvement seen lately in Pakistan-Russia relations that remained tense for more than a half century augurs well not only for the two states but also for the two regions of Central and South Asia. It is going to help curb the rise of extremist forces and terrorism which have posed serious threats to not only regional peace and stability but economic development also particularly since the start of the conflict in Afghanistan which the two regions surround on all sides. If Pakistan and Russia are able to leave behind the legacy of their sour past the potential and opportunities to strengthen their relationship through trade, investment and collaboration in energy and defence sectors are immense. This study aims to analyze the different phases of Pakistan-Russia relations and the dynamics of the current rapprochement if it proceeds without hindrance and their impact on the geo-political and security environment of the region. In the end recommendations are suggested that may facilitate the reset in Pak-Russia ties.

Key Words: Pakistan, Russia, Rapprochement, Security and Economic Cooperation.

Introduction

Traditionally, Pak-Russian relations have been marred by two historical developments: (a) Pakistan's early dependence on the West led by the United States and (b) the Indo-centric approach adopted by Russia and Pakistan's response to that policy. The story of Pak-Russian relationship can be described as a tale of misperceptions and lost opportunities.¹ Opportunities that political developments offered in the past were missed by both the countries due to their divergent approaches.

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¹ Nazir Hussain, "Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options," *Journal of Political Studies*, University of Punjab, vol. 19 issue 1 (Summer 2012): 79.

According to analysts, such an opportunity has once again offered itself and fortunately both Pakistan and Russia are favourably inclined to exploit it given the present mutuality of interest and convergence of views on various important regional and international issues² especially Afghanistan and terrorism.

The stumbling block in the way of good relations has been Pakistan's pro-West policy during the Cold War years and on the Russian side, its strong pro-India tilt. There is no denying the fact of Pakistan's alliance with the United States and that of India with the former Soviet Union in the second half of the past century. Russia inherits that historic tilt towards India which continues to enjoy very good political, military and diplomatic relations with the former³ in spite of its recent strategic deals with the US. It is all very well for India to move closer to the United States but for Pakistan to better its ties with Russia is something that India does not like.⁴ The trend of growing India-US ties is not new and has been seen since the 1990s reaching its high point with President Clinton's visit to India in 2000. It would be hard to conceive Russia may have been comfortable with this development in India's relationship with the United States or could ignore its far reaching implications for strategic developments in the region.⁵ The US, too, on its part cannot afford that during this critical phase of the Afghan war, Russia gets closer to Pakistan and offsets the pressures that America has exerted on Pakistan.⁶ These are the contrasting contours of the context in which the improvement in Pak-Russian relations may be seen.

Though the melting of the ice in Pak-Russian relations is a welcome development, it is obvious that Russia cannot replace the US and cannot substitute it as far as the domain of defence collaboration, economic aid, trade and market for Pakistani goods is concerned the European Union and the US are the largest trading partners of Pakistan and their share in its economic development is too big to dispense with.⁷ However in the present stance such a reversal is neither conceivable nor desirable. Russia is an important actor in the region and Pakistan needs to realign more closely with it under its present policy of diversifying relationships and increasing emphasis on the Look East trend. Russian President Putin's cancellation of his visit to Pakistan and going

² Khalid Iqbal, "Russia-Pakistan-America," *Nation* (Islamabad), October 8, 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dr Raja Muhammad Khan, "Deferral of Putin's Schedule Visit," *Pakistan Observer* (Islamabad), October 1, 2012.

⁵ Air Commodore (R) Khalid Iqbal, "Myth and Reality of American Aid," Opinion Maker, May 30, 2011, <http://www.opinion-maker.org/2011/05/myth-and-reality-of-american-aid/> (accessed October 21, 2012).

⁶ Khalid Iqbal, "Russia-Pakistan-America."

⁷ Nazir Hussain, "Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options," 88.

straight to India last December indicates it is not yet time for the reset phase in Islamabad–Moscow relations.

Phases in Pak-Russian Relations

Invitation Era

During the Cold War era Pakistan had the option to either go East and align itself with the Communist bloc or join the capitalist club. Pakistan chose the latter. There were three major reasons for that choice: Firstly, its colonial heritage and the predilection of its feudal elite and the bureaucracy to remain a part of the British Empire. Islamabad is said to have ignored the Soviet invitation and preferred a distant ally to an immediate neighbour.⁸ Secondly, its dire need for economic support that Moscow could not provide and, thirdly the security and defence of its eastern border for which it needed military assistance. Together this meant Pakistan's struggle for maintaining the balance of power with a superior neighbour.

1965-1989 Era

In the beginning of this period, Pak-USSR relations saw some signs of improvement in the shape of signing of the first bilateral Agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation in 1965.⁹ This was followed by Moscow's crucial intermediary role in ending the Indo-Pak war through the Tashkent Agreement. The setting up of the Steel mill in the 1970s was another tangible help provided by the former USSR to Pakistan. The second phase of Pak-Soviet relations ended when the latter invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan opted to join the Afghan jihad and fight a proxy war for the US against the former USSR.

Post Cold War Era

The rebirth of improved Pak-Russia relations took place in the post Cold War era at the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan when the US left Pakistan high and dry after using its resources in its proxy war against the USSR. This era brought Pakistan and Russia closer to each other as seen in the exchange of high official visits in both countries. Pakistan and Russia entered into a number of investment, trade and industrial agreements following a visit to Russia of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif. But relations again

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Russian–Pakistani Relations," Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Karachi, <http://www.rusconsulkarachi.mid.ru/RUSSIA-PAKISTAN.htm> (accessed October 30, 2012).

soured due to Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime in Kabul which was fighting the Russian supported Northern Alliance.

Era of Institutionalized-relations

Since the events of 9/11, Pakistan has adopted a proactive and pragmatic approach in its foreign relations that has helped the country in staging a diplomatic comeback at regional and global levels.¹⁰ Pakistan has been able to effectively transform the post-9/11 challenges into opportunities. The decision of Pakistan to join the international effort of war against terrorism and consequently the changed policy towards the Taliban led to the new era of Pak-Russia relations. President Musharraf visit to the Russian Federation in 2002 led to the formation of the institutionalized-relations between Islamabad and Moscow. As a result of President Musharraf visit to Moscow, *The Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism*, *The Joint Working Group on Strategic Stability* and *Inter-governmental Joint Commission* were established. These JWG's have held their regular meetings since then.¹¹

The Changing Regional Scene

The current mantra of geo politics is the principle of unity in diversity. Thus dialogue and partnership of all members of the international community are being seen as the key to bringing about a viable multi-polar world that is emerging from the ashes of the post Cold War era. In this new world order all states would compete in a healthy way while aspiring for mutually beneficial harmony and stability.¹² For decades, despite being geographically contiguous Moscow and Islamabad viewed each other as antagonists in the "East-West confrontation."¹³ This resulted in Russia's special relations with India and Pakistan's with the US. The US objective was the Soviet Union's containment and Pakistan's need was support against a bellicose India.¹⁴ It can be argued that Pakistan itself has never deliberately postulated any policy against the Soviet Union. But, because of its alliance with the west, Pakistan, its territory

¹⁰ Fazl-ur-Rahman, "Pakistan's Evolving Relations with China, Russia and Central Asia," in *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia: Russia and Its Neighbours in Crisis*, ed. Iwashita Akihiro (Sapporo, Hokkaido/Japan: Slavic Research Center 2007), 211.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹² Irina Serenko, "Russia-Pakistan: Scientific, Educational and Cultural Potential of Mutual Cooperation," *Central Asia*, issue 61, http://www.asc-centralasia.edu.pk/Issue_61/07-RUSSIA%20_PAKISTAN.html (accessed, November 15, 2012).

¹³ Dr Rashid Ahmad Khan, "The Pakistan-Russia Relationship: Geopolitical Shift in South and Central Asia?," *Global Research*, October 22, 2012, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-pakistan-russia-relationship-geopolitical-shift-in-south-and-central-asia/5309135> (accessed, October 25, 2012).

¹⁴ Nadir Mir, "Pakistan-Russia Geopolitics," *Nation* (Islamabad) November 30, 2012.

and institutions, have been indirectly used against the Soviets.¹⁵ This situation has changed. Russia regaining confidence after the initial years of shock in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union is emerging stronger on the world map, while Pakistan is in the process of shedding its exclusivist approach and peculiar western hang up. It believes more in regional consolidation and its development and progress in associating more closely with regional organisations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is in this changed climate that Russia and Pakistan are coming closer.

Moscow's Rationale

The factors that persuade Moscow to have cordial relations with Pakistan are:

- a) President Putin's willingness to adapt Russia's foreign policy to the new geopolitical realities and his intention to pursue a multi-vectored approach in South Asia.
- b) Russia is seeking new markets for its military hardware to keep its economy afloat; Pakistan could be a prospective buyer.
- c) Russia is keen to gain Pakistan's help in controlling its own Muslim insurgents.
- d) Russian Federation is reasserting its role in its immediate sphere of influence and beyond.
- e) Russia wants to checkmate US influence in its backyard.

Islamabad's Rationale

In the changing geo-political dynamics of the world, Pakistan needs to have improved and progressive relations with all countries. For that reason, the factors that sway Pakistan to have an amiable relationship with Moscow are:

- a) Pakistan wants somehow to rid itself of the US straitjacket.
- b) Pakistan has envisaged that regional approach to regional issues would provide durable results. Pakistan's robust relations with Russia would provide a strategic balance in the region vis-à-vis Indo-US rapprochement.
- c) Pakistan's depletion of faith in the United States as a reliable and dependable partner.
- d) Reset in Pak-Russia relations would broaden Pakistan's foreign policy options and dispel the impression of being a US proxy in the region.

¹⁵ Nazir Hussain, "Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options," 81.

High Official Visits: Optimistic Indications

After the institutionalized-relationship resulting from President Musharraf 2002 visit to Moscow, mutual relations got a fillip from the official three-day visit in 2007 of the Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Fradkov to Pakistan. Besides, President Zardari and the former Russian President, Medvedev, have met six times since May 2011.¹⁶ In this regard, President Zardari stated during his visit to Moscow in 2011: “Our countries are very close neighbours; we are located in the same region, and although we do not share borders, our hearts beat in unison.”¹⁷ Moreover, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, cancelled his visit to India and came to a Pakistan where he also expressed Russia's support for Pakistan's standpoint on drone attacks. Russia condemned the attacks on the Salala Post and issued a friendly public statement.

In the past few months, a number of events have taken place which indicate that Russia is giving preference to Pakistan over India.¹⁸ Former Russian Defence Minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, postponed his visit to India, where he was to participate in the Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation. The meeting was scheduled on October 4, 2012 but instead, Sardyukov, preferred to meet with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani, who had on the very same day arrived in Russia on an official visit and talked about consolidating progress in defence co-operation. Russia's Deputy Minister for Energy and representatives of leading energy giant Gazprom attended the Pak-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on 10th September 2012.¹⁹ These are noteworthy signs of progressive development of relations between the two countries and speak of growing economic cooperation in several spheres.

¹⁶ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Islamabad, Moscow Set Sights on New Era in Relations,” *Dawn* (Islamabad), September 18, 2011.

¹⁷ James Brooke, “Russia Courts Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia,” *Voice of America*, May 11, 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/content/russia-courts-pakistan-afghanistan-and-central-asia-121725289/167455.html> (accessed October 15, 2012).

¹⁸ Russia has a deep interest in the reset of relations between the USA and Pakistan. Russia has been viewing with concern that India has decisively aligned itself with the US and that America has not just gained access to South Asia, but is also making fast inroads into Central Asia. Russia is seeking an ally in the region as a substitute for India, also see, Nazir Hussain, “Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options.”

¹⁹ Muhammad Farooq Afzal, “Pakistan-Russia Relations Warm Up,” *Business Recorder* (Karachi), December 18, 2012, http://www.brecorder.com/index.php?option=com_news&view=single&id=1269401 (accessed November 3, 2012).

Mutual Employment Sector

Unlike the past both countries want to uniformly broaden their relations as both are reciprocally engaged in several mutual developmental sectors. Pakistan facing energy crises needs Russian help in that sector. Russia has expressed its concern and interest in socio-economic growth of Pakistani industry and has also signed memorandums of understanding following the visit of a high-powered delegation to Islamabad in September 2012²⁰ for investment in the following Pakistani projects:

- i. Expansion and modernization of Pakistan Steel Mills.²¹
- ii. Provision of technical support for the Guddu and Muzaffargarh power plants.
- iii. New Jamshoro Power Plant of 500 MW capacity and Tarbela-4 project.
- iv. Railroad infrastructure, agriculture, and metallurgy.
- v. Developing trans-regional rail links with Iran and other countries in Central Asia.
- vi. Electricity transmission from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (CASA-1000) in the Central Asia-South Asia.
- vii. Iran-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI).
- viii. Thar Coal Project.

There have been no relations between the two countries in the area of defence except for one maverick helicopter deal in 1969 during President Yahya's regime. But now there has been a comprehensive boost in cooperation following Pakistani Air Chief Marshal, Tahir Rafiq Butt's, visit to Moscow and Russian Military Chief Col-Gen Alexander Postnikov's visit to Pakistan last year. He proposed the possibility of expanding defence ties by holding:

- i. Joint military exercises,
- ii. exchanging trainees and trainers and
- iii. selling and buying weapons.²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Under the MoUs, Russia will provide assistance of \$300 to \$500 million for the modernisation and expansion of Pakistan Steel Mills.

²² Dr Saima Ashraf Kayani, "New Dimensions in Pak-Russia Relations," *World Times*, October 1, 2012, http://www.jworldtimes.com/Article/102012_New_Dimensions_in_Pak_Russia_Relations (accessed October 1, 2012).

Vibrant Dynamic: Afghanistan

The approaching endgame in Afghanistan is perhaps the major factor in the dynamics of closer Pak-Russia relations. Though once Afghanistan was a key stumbling block in this relationship it is now a cause for getting closer, especially in the post-US withdrawal scenario (2014). As, Russian President's special envoy for Afghanistan, Mr Zamir Kabulov, said: "Our own experience in the past and the track record of others in recent years has taught us that the problem of Afghanistan cannot be resolved without the constructive involvement of Pakistan."²³

More importantly, both countries are opposed to the Indian stance²⁴ on US permanent military bases in Afghanistan. Thus, in the period of post-US withdrawal, the role of Pakistan and Russia in maintaining their broader regional imperatives and accepting their respective spheres of influence in Afghanistan would reflect the viability of their relationship.

Way Forward: A Win-Win Game

Revisiting Foreign Policy

Both Pakistan and Russia need to revisit their foreign policies in light of their geographical proximity, a factor neglected in the past to the detriment of mutual advantage. The way forward looks like enhanced cooperation in trade, economic and defence related activities. This was reflected in the statement of Pakistan foreign ministry on Lavrov's visit: "the two countries also share the common objective of peace and stability in the broader region and attach importance to regional connectivity both in terms of trade and energy cooperation."²⁵

The geopolitical and strategic imperatives of the region require Islamabad and Moscow to enhance their bilateral relations and mutual cooperation, Pakistan provides an alternative route which is closer to Africa, Europe and the Middle East, and is accessible to Russia through Central Asia.²⁶ Towards this end, President Zardari has invited Russia to use Pakistani territory to gain access to the Arabian Sea and beyond.²⁷

²³ Vladimir Radyuhin, "Still Waiting for the Bear Hug," *Hindu*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/still-waiting-for-the-bear-hug/article3942782.ece> (accessed October 8, 2012).

²⁴ India wants permanent US military bases in Afghanistan. India foresees a role in Afghanistan and US military bases would provide her a dedicated strength to continue as an American proxy.

²⁵ "Visit of Russian Foreign Minister to Pakistan on 3-4 October, 2012," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2012, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/mfa/pages/article.aspx?id=1327&type=1>

²⁶ Aftab Hussain, "Russia Backs Pakistan in Geopolitical Shift," *Global Times*, November 15, 2012,

The Russian president's intention to visit Pakistan that for some reason could not materialize nevertheless indicates a vital change in its policy towards the latter and there are positive signs of a transformation in Pakistani thinking about the former that is seen in its current stress on diversification in foreign relations and what is called the "look east" policy away from over reliance on one power.

Opportunity for Eliminating Instability

Growing Pak-Russia relations would also provide Pakistan an opportunity to extricate itself from the environment of instability in which it is presently trapped.²⁸ Furthermore, Pakistan's direct involvement in US policies in Afghanistan as a partner in the so called war on terror has made it a hot bed of extremism.²⁹ The issues of extremism, terrorism, radicalism and separatism are of mutual concern for both Pakistan and Russia as they affect the stability of the entire region. Pakistan needs strategic balance in the region for which its rapprochement with Russia is of vital importance.

Possibility of SCO Status

Pakistan's efforts to gain regular membership of SCO³⁰ can be greatly helped by stronger ties with the Russian Federation. Conversely, even as an SCO observer Pakistan has gained useful access to Russian leadership which has helped in the improvement of mutual ties and lessening distrust between them. Russian President Putin, publicly endorsed Pakistan's bid to join the SCO and said "Pakistan is a very important partner in South Asia and the Muslim world for Russia."

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=744596&moduleId=405&PortalID=0>

²⁷ Ramtanu Maitra, "Improved Pakistan-Russia Relations: A Necessity for Stability in Eurasia," *Executive Intelligence Review*, February 24, 2012, http://www.larouchepub.com/eiw/public/2012/eirv39n08-20120224/33-36_3908.pdf (accessed, December 21, 2012).

²⁸ Ramtanu Maitra, "Pakistan Crisis Could Benefit Obama Administration: A Coup in Slow-Mo?," *IntelliBriefs*, June 28, 2012, <http://intellibriefs.blogspot.com/2012/06/pakistan-crisis-could-benefit-obama.html> (accessed November 12, 2012).

²⁹ Ramtanu Maitra, "Improved Pakistan-Russia Relations."

³⁰ Mr Putin publically endorsed Pakistan's bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a mutual-security group of China, Russia and four Central Asian States said by Harsh V Pant, "Changes in Region Push Pakistan and Russia Together," *National*, October 29, 2012,

Recommendations

- There is enormous potential for cooperation in energy sector, steel production, telecommunication, space technology, oil and gas etc. In fact, Russian technology to explore natural resources is the best in the world. Pakistan may attract Russian businesses to invest in Pakistan, particularly in gas exploration and gas /oil pipelines.³¹
- There is a need to revitalize the activities of both countries' friendship societies for bringing Pakistani and Russian people closer to each other through exchange visits. A coherent strategy should be adopted for enhancing people-to-people contacts in the field of education, science, trade, culture, tourism and sports etc.
- There is a need to enhance defence cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad to diversify Pakistan's critical dependencies.
- Any differences between the two countries on their approach to the Afghan issue should be sorted out as this would vitally matter in achieving lasting peace and stability in the region. ■

³¹ Ambassador Tariq Fatemi, "Recommendations for President's Visit to Russia," *Center for Research and Security Studies*, <http://crss.pk/downloads/Reports/Special-Posts/President-Zardari%27s-Russian-Visit-Recommendations.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2012).