

Rekindled Pak-Russia Relations



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The writer is an Islamabad-based security expert associated with Strategic Vision Institute, and is a visiting faculty at NDU. He is a post-graduate in International Relations from Kingston University, London. He tweets @ScholarYMK

During the Cold War epoch, divergent priorities and self-interests, the Indo-Russian partnership and geopolitical realities could not allow a breathing space for Pak-Russia relations to grow and strengthen. The geopolitical scalar did not change after the USSR's collapse either. It is only now, after a quarter of a century, that Moscow is looking to reinvigorate bilateral relations. Moreover, traditional Indo-Russian military exclusivity, which has a history of bilateral cooperation, has been under strain for a while — due to strong Indo-US defence ties — and cracks are opening up, indicating that new opportunities for defence cooperation between Pakistan and Russia are in ferment.

Taking advantage of India's blossoming economy still remains a priority for Russia's foreign policy. But lately, it has also been seeking diversification in its foreign policy options and is looking for improved multidimensional ties with Pakistan.

The Russian renaissance in global political affairs, with a strategic motif of balancing of forces in the Putin era, has been shaping new contours in international politics that could provide a favourable environment for improving Russia's overall relations with Pakistan.

A Russian-Pakistani rapprochement started with a milestone military cooperation pact when the Russian defence minister, after 45 years, paid an official visit to Pakistan in December 2014. Another landmark was achieved with a \$2 billion inter-governmental deal between the two countries for the construction of a gas pipeline from Lahore to Karachi in October 2015. In the same year, Moscow agreed to sell four Mi-35M helicopters to Pakistan and welcomed Islamabad when it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This year, already, Russian Army Commander-in-Chief Oleg Salyukov has announced the first-ever "mutual special drills in mountainous terrain" and Khawaja Asif, Pakistan's defence minister, visited Moscow to enhance further cooperation.

These recent engagements between Russia and Pakistan amid changing geo-political and geo-strategic milieu along with evolving inter-regional economic prospects and emerging threats to regional stability have steered both countries to define a new era of friendship.

A structured mechanism between the two countries could provide a framework to collaborate in the areas of defence, trade, investment, science, technology, agriculture, education and culture. In contemporary times, Russian actions have underscored the hardcore realities of the region, for instance, combating illicit drug trafficking in Afghanistan, improving relations with Pakistan while realising its geo-strategic importance, and preventing the emergence of the IS threat and the overflow of the Taliban insurgency from Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics (CAR) and to its own territories.

Both countries also believe that transnational mega projects, including the CPEC and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, are paving the way for regional integration. Russian strategists have rightly realised that Pakistan's importance cannot be ignored in Pan-Eurasian integration and its geo-strategic location also has a pivotal role to play in the revival of the Silk Route, as well as in Eurasian Union integration. On the surface, no major obstacles restrict both countries from expanding their multifaceted relations, but certain factors can slow down their pace of growth. Pakistan and Russia are getting closer at a time when global politics is under transformation, moving from a unipolar world to a multipolar one. Amid the US/Nato partial withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Indian tilt towards the US and the West and Russia's rise, Pakistan and Russia have the opportunity to translate their engagements into tangible positive outcomes for both countries.

Recent upward trajectories in their political, economic and security ties at bilateral and multilateral levels are a manifestation of foreign policy directives, which means that both countries are ready to cooperate with each other, forgetting the bitterness of the past. Defence and economic relations seem to be their immediate priority. Pakistan's full membership of the SCO would provide new avenues for security and economic cooperation with Russia, China and CARs. The SCO can also facilitate Pakistan and India to work through their longstanding issues and move forward for economic cooperation and regional connectivity. Pakistan and Russia have limited cultural exchange at the moment and there are opportunities for people of both countries to interact with each other. This is a key impediment to creating an understanding of cultures, traditions and values. Language barriers between the two communities play a significant role in restricting

cultural exchange programmes. However, one way to get over this hurdle could be to provide incentives to students to learn the Russian language in Pakistan, as well as Urdu in Russia.

Besides the interactions among government officials and parliamentarians, people-to-people contacts centering around academia, and media exchange programmes can work to catalyse improved relations. It is difficult to predict whether these rekindled relations between Pakistan and Russia will go a long way or not. For longstanding relations, one paramount consideration for both sides is to comprehend emerging realities in the region and accordingly coordinate and cooperate for a prosperous future.