

SVI In-house Seminar/Panel Discussion: Report – 10th October 2019

The Current Status and Future of Pakistan – Russia Relations



Compiled by: Waqas Jan

Edited by: S. Said Kazmi

STRATEGIC VISION INSTITUTE (SVI),
ISLAMABAD

The Strategic Vision Institute held an In-house seminar on the 'The Current Status and Future of Pakistan-Russia Relations' on Thursday 10, October 2019. This was held with the aim of appraising the progress of ongoing initiatives as well as exploring new opportunities to further broaden the Pak-Russia bi-lateral framework. Russian Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Pakistan H.E. Danila V. Ganich presided over the proceedings as the Chief Guest. Leading Russian academics including Prof. Dr. Leonid Issaev (Associate Prof. Department for Asian and African Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg), Dr. Andrey Korotayev (Senior Research Professor, Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow) and Dr. Alisa Shishkina (Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences Moscow) spoke on the occasion. Lt. Gen. (R) Naeem Khalid Lodhi (former Minister of Defence) offered his remarks as a discussant.



Welcoming the speakers and participants, Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema, President/Executive Director of the SVI presented his introductory remarks highlighting some of the most salient features of the Pakistan-Russia bilateral relationship. He briefly explained how Pak-Russia relations had steadily progressed since the fall of the Soviet Union across multiple political and diplomatic fronts. These included important milestones in defense cooperation which include the sale and transfer of key military technologies as well as the annually held (since 2016) military exercises between both countries. However, while such cooperation has been welcomed on both sides, there is a widespread perception that Pak-Russia ties still have not reached their full economic potential. This holds particularly true in the realms of bilateral trade and a host of other investment opportunities within Pakistan. With respect to the most present developments taking place in the South Asian region, Russia has however played a highly important and much needed balancing role as evident in the ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. This was especially evident in the aftermath of both the Pulwama crisis from February/March 2019 as well as the recently held UNSC meeting on Kashmir where

Russia struck a more conciliatory and balanced note on the issue between both India and Pakistan. While all these developments show that Pak-Russia ties are headed in the right direction, the pace is not satisfactory.



After his brief remarks, Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema invited the first speaker Prof. Dr. Leonid Issaev to give “An Overview of Pakistan–Russia Rapprochement” setting much of the context for the ensuing discussion. Explaining the historic shifts in Russia’s approach to foreign policy, Dr. Issaev stated that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has adopted a more pragmatic as opposed to a more ideologically inclined approach to its foreign policy. This has been evident in Russia’s international relations where it has sought to play a more balanced, mediatory and neutral role in regions such as the South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. While Russia most definitely has a stake and a policy in certain ongoing regional conflicts, it has still tried to adopt a principled approach of serving as a balancing mediator within these conflicts.

As far as Pakistan-Russia relations are concerned, he stated that it is no secret that these relations have not been that strong especially Pak-Soviet relations during the Cold War era. Even though trade between both countries has grown significantly since the collapse of the Soviet Union accounting for US \$800 million as of last year, it is still not that enough. For instance, it is 17 times less than Russia’s trade with India. Hence, the present level of economic ties between both countries is most definitely an issue that needs to be overcome. Some of the most significant challenges impeding the development of closer economic ties however include bureaucratic hurdles and the Indian question

Nevertheless, when looking ahead it is important to realize that the new generation of Russians does not know much about Pakistan and as such does not carry with it the baggage of the past. They do not remember the 80’s and as such pose a cogent opportunity for building a renewed impetus for cooperation and closer ties in the near future. As has been the trend from the recent past, Russia has been actively diversifying its approach and policy in key emerging

regions such as in Africa and Asia. Pakistan too is diversifying its approach as is evident in its growing relations with China and Central Asia.

He concluded his remarks by noting that while Russia is diversifying its approach in these regions, it is not competing with the United States or working to supplant its influence. As such even in the South Asian region, it is unlikely that Russia will replace the US as Pakistan's strategic partner or its overall strategic approach in general.

The second speaker Dr. Andrey Korotayev while building on the previous topic presented a more detailed breakdown of "Potential Areas of Cooperation in Pak-Russia Relations". Within the context of Pakistan's existing relations he stated that at the present Russia cannot compete with China in the economic sphere nor with the US in the defence sphere considering the historic precedents set by both in terms of their cooperation with Pakistan. As a result, while it is unlikely that Russia may embark on such a comprehensive strategic partnership with Pakistan, there are still a number of opportunities which can be pursued between both countries. For instance, while trade between both countries has grown steadily, regional trends suggest that there is still huge potential. For instance, if one was to present a more adequate comparison, Russia's trade with Pakistan is three times less than Russia's trade with Bangladesh. This definitely indicates that there is a lot of room for growth.



Yet, there are a number of reasons why this has remained limited. For instance, one of the basic challenges being faced in this area is a general lack of information, coupled by tedious bureaucratic hurdles on both sides. Russia is already known for its lack of business-friendliness for foreigners and there is broad agreement that this needs to improve. The same is the case for Pakistan as well, although there are indications that steps are being taken to address such issues. Another major challenge is the actual distance between the two countries, but this is also being overcome to a large extent by the Belt and Road Initiative.

There have been some suggestions to create a free trade zone between Pakistan and the Eurasian Economic Zone. It is important however to first assess how realistic such an option would be in terms of its outcomes and feasibility. This needs to be discussed and studied further to have any form of a meaningful impact desired by both sides. He suggested that while greater regional cooperation is definitely a step in the right direction, a more logical suggestion would be to develop closer cooperation in the energy sector. However, even this has unfortunately not yet materialized to its full extent. One example is the North-South gas pipeline which was proposed some years ago. While the Russian company in charge of this project had been limited by sanctions before, these obstacles have now more or less been overcome. It is also worth noting here that the Russian Gas giant Gazprom had lost the bid for supplying LNG to Pakistan this year but will hopefully be able to win that bid next year. Another famous project standing as a hallmark of Pak-Russia cooperation is the Pakistan steel mills which was set up during the Soviet era. Recent indications of how it might be soon jointly managed by Chinese and Russian companies could serve as a viable example of China-Russia cooperation with a major focus on further developing manufacturing and industrial sectors within Pakistan.

Dr. Korotayev further stated that within the realm of arms exports the past decade has seen immense potential with respect to Pakistan. However this potential has perhaps benefited China more than Russia. Still the Pakistani military has shown considerable interest in purchasing Russian weapons and technology, with this area remaining ripe with opportunities. He rightly mentioned that perhaps some of the most feasible and yet unexplored suggestions for cooperation are to be had in the pharmaceutical and IT sectors for which there are a number of avenues that can be further explored and developed. They all serve as plausible avenues of cooperation and present a logical foundation to build better trade relations on. These for instance can also be developed on the basis of how a number of trade links have been recently developed within the Russian Federation between its various territories. There are also reports that at the present a number of opportunities are being explored between the Space Agencies of both countries with a tangible agreement close to being finalized within this area. These include multiple areas of cooperation dealing with research and technological

development that are likely to serve as a useful base for further cooperation. Dr. Korotayev opined that in the realm of nuclear weapons and/or energy, both Russia and Pakistan are limited by certain international agreements and the extent to which they can cooperate in these areas. There is however no denying that such agreements can be revised or revisited in the future.

He concluded by saying that at the present there remain huge opportunities for cultural exchange yet even this has not materialized fully. The last such exchange happened in 2007 with little if any serious development having taken place in this area since then. Suggesting a possible way forward, Dr. Korotayev stressed on the need to explore and initiate more exchange programs between the universities of both countries that can help lay the foundations of an important aspect of bilateral cooperation with a view to the long-run.

Last but not the least he opined that the Afghan peace process represents a major area of cooperation between both countries. It is an area where both Russia and Pakistan's interests in terms of promoting peace in Afghanistan and eradicating terrorism from the region are aligned, presenting a cogent example of an effective and tangible area of cooperation.



The third speaker Dr. Alisa Shishkina further expanded the discussion, speaking on the “Evolving Regional Dynamics, SCO, and Future of Pakistan-Russia Relations”. She explained how the evolving regional dynamics were largely defined by Pakistan's expanding relations with the Central Asian Republics based on the pivotal role being played by it as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Within this context expanding ties with Pakistan was also a major priority for the Central Asian Republics which includes cooperating with Pakistan across a number of key areas straddling between the economic, diplomatic, security and cultural realms. These for instance include, enhancing border controls, combating the illegal movement of drugs and other illicit materials while promoting greater connectivity and trade with regard to key commodities. All

of these represent key avenues of cooperation with which Russia's interests are also aligned at both the multi-lateral and bilateral levels.

Pakistan's economic relations with the countries of Central Asia account for a little over a quarter of a century but the Central Asian vector is given special importance in shaping modern foreign economic policy. Among the main goals pursued by Pakistan in Central Asia, it should be noted, first of all, the expansion of its political and economic influence in the region, the development through its territory of a transit corridor for goods from / to Central Asian states. In turn, strengthening ties with the Islamic Republic is also one of the priority directions of the regional policy of the Central Asian republics: they consider Pakistan as an important partner in ensuring security in the Asian region, possessing large-scale human resources and increasing industrial and military potential. The countries of the region are also attracted by the possibility of using transport communications in Pakistan, including the seaport of Gwadar for transit trade.

Dr. Shishkina maintained that the membership in the SCO, as well as a number of conflicts that have been observed around it for a long time, also play an important role in regional dynamics. She recognized that it is the region of Kashmir, Baluchistan that makes it a volatile region. Referring to the surveys of experts conducted as part of the visit to Pakistan, she observed that while the situation is gradually stabilizing and relations with Iran are improving, the conflict potential of the former, unfortunately, remains at a high level.

Regarding Pakistan's rivalry with India, she mentioned that it is not the first time that Russia has helped mediate a conflict between two SCO member states. Russia's successful mediation of the Osh crisis between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2010 stands as a case in point where Russia played an instrumental role in avoiding further bloodshed and preventing the conflict from escalating towards a major military confrontation. The same can also be related to Russia's position on Kashmir which has been consistently that of balancing between both countries. This has been most apparent in Russia's recent stance at the UNSC where it

supported China's bid for holding the informal UNSC meeting on Kashmir despite having voted in favor of India in the past.

Dr. Shishkina however believed that it is perhaps Afghanistan which represents one of the greatest number of areas where both Russian and Pakistani interests have begun to align at the present. Despite being a major impediment to developing closer ties in the past, it now serves as an important basis for enhanced cooperation. For instance, both Russia and Pakistan agree on tackling terrorism and the cross-border movement of illicit goods and materials through enhanced border controls. About five thousand people have died from terrorism specifically in Afghanistan over the past 10 years. According to the director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime Antonio Mario Costa, over the past 10 years 1 million people have died from the Afghan heroin. Both Russia and Pakistan thus have a shared interest in curbing this menace and have embarked on joint efforts at tackling drug trafficking and its financing. She expressed hope that all of these efforts are likely to play a major role in helping bring about and support a lasting peace in Afghanistan which both countries are actively working to help mediate.

Talking about the SCO, Dr. Shishkina stated that while economic cooperation has remained a major pillar amongst its members, it should be emphasized that the platform is not merely a talking show but a forum that was setup for fostering greater action amongst its members. She suggested that there should be a division of labor and a shared sense of ownership and responsibility amongst all its member states especially regarding the issues they all face as a whole. It should also be used as a platform for fostering greater socio-economic integration with an emphasis on fostering a shared identity through people to people and cultural ties. Based on the common challenges faced by SCO member states such as those described above, some obvious areas of cooperation include promoting cooperation in the health sector where a key focus can be made on shared rehabilitation programs aimed at treating and curbing drug abuse. This can help complement existing efforts being taken by member states while providing another viable avenue of cooperation based on the shared interests of all.



Lt. Gen. (R) Naeem Khalid Lodhi in his capacity as the seminar's discussant thanked the visiting Russian delegation for their candid and detailed views. He stated that it was important to note the key role Russia was playing to limit the influence of the world's only superpower i.e. the US; a super-power that was otherwise desperately trying to extend its unilateral reign through various organizations and external bodies such as the UNO, IMF and FATF.

With its ability to single-handedly impose sanctions and influence world politics through the tyranny of the dollar, there were many in the world yearning for a change in the status quo. At the present, China and Russia are the only powers challenging this status-quo with the hope of bringing an end to hegemony and tyranny of this unilateral world order. The stabilizing role Russia has been playing in this regard has been evident in the Middle East, such as in Syria where it has been successful in challenging the unilateral hegemony being imposed upon the region. Afghanistan also presents a cogent and effective example where Pakistan also shares Russia's interests.

Drawing on his military experience, Gen Lodhi explained that he was well familiar with importance and efficacy of Russian armaments and technology some of which comprised of a key portion of Pakistan's military arsenals. Referring to some of the crucial Russian defense and weapons systems currently in use by the Pakistani military, he also stated that there was a concerted desire to foster greater cooperation in this area, particularly in the fields of rocket engineering in which Russia's expertise was unparalleled throughout the world. He also emphasized the need for greater socio-cultural exchanges focusing on the importance of learning each other's languages. This would pave the way for greater cultural understanding between the two nations helping lay the foundations for more long-term avenues of cooperation.

He lamented however that employing an India-centric approach to both countries' ties was also a major factor which needed to be overcome if a bilateral relationship was to truly flourish.

This for instance is exemplified by India's purchase of the Russian S-400 Air defense system which Pakistan has had its reservations over. However, he was sure that just like Turkey, a good friend of Pakistan, was able to procure the S-400; Pakistan too would be sold the system provided Pakistan could afford it.

With regard to the regional perspective, he was confident that there is an emerging bloc in Eurasia comprising of Russia, China and the CARs where a new locus of power is forming towards which global interests are gravitating. The UNO is being split apart and the end of a unipolar world order is close at hand, especially considering the direction and trends in which global politics is heading towards.

Talking about more specific avenues of cooperation, he mentioned that while Pak-Russia cooperation in Afghanistan has borne fruit, there are still issues in Baluchistan in which Russia can help clarify and provide information on ground realities. This accounts for just one of the many key areas in which Russia can help bring stability not only at the regional level but at a wider global level while helping end the tyranny of the US dollar.

Talks by the three speakers were followed by the Question and Answer Session:

Amb. (R) Masood Khalid (Former Ambassador of Pakistan to the People's Republic of China) stated that given the impression by the speakers it seemed that there is a lot of ground that needs to be covered in Pak-Russia relations. As such there is a definite need to review what can be done in this regard nowadays. He mentioned that since the point was raised that there is not much awareness amongst Russia's youth regarding Pakistan, this was definitely an area which



the visiting delegation can help contribute with regard to the academic and commercial sectors. He further stated that while a point was raised that Pakistan's historical ties with the US and China served as some sort of an impediment to closer Pak-Russia ties, this point needed to be qualified taking into account the respective history and trajectory against which such ties were developed. There is a rocky history that is tied to Pak-US ties where both countries have had

their ups and downs. Pak-China ties also have a long and great history of brotherly ties that has been developed over different times and contexts. As such Pakistan has always attempted to maintain balanced and close partnerships on the basis of shared interests and looks forward to expanding its ties with Russia as well. For instance, there is great potential in forming an economic bloc between China, Russia, CARs, Iran and Pakistan that can help address any of the above perceived impediments that were mentioned earlier.

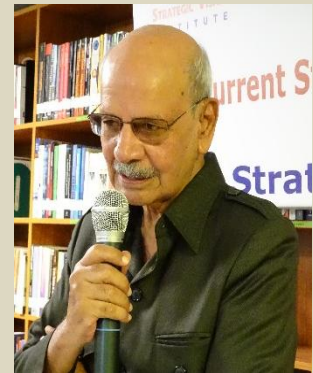


AVM (R) Faaiz Amir (Vice Chancellor, Air University) posed two questions to the panel. In his first question he asked, what was Russia's own self-image with regard to its role in the international system? His second question revolved around examining whether there were any differences in the Russian education system following its transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. Answering the first question, Dr. Koratayev stated that while the

Russian Ambassador as a representative of the Russian government was in a better position to answer this question, he believed that based on his own analysis Russia does not consider the US as a unilateral super-power and is opposed to the very concept of there being a single hegemonic power. As such Russia itself was a power among other powers within a diverse international system. Referring to the question on the educational system he explained that while there were several differences between the Russian education system of the Soviet era and the present day, there are both positive and negative developments that are too many to detail here at this forum. However, some of the most salient features that have emerged are the inclusion and increased focus on the social sciences as well as perhaps more academic freedom to voice criticisms and dissenting opinions. Answering the same question on education, Dr. Shishkina stated that not much has changed and that there is still a marked difference in the quality of education between the rural and urban areas of Russia. While there have been some improvements as well as the development of certain experimental schools in the cities, Russia is still too large and diverse to be representative of a set standard. Adding to this Dr. Issaev stated that following the fall of the Soviet Union there has also been greater connectivity between Russian and international universities as well as a number of other

international organizations especially with Eastern universities such as in China and Japan as opposed to Western ones. Another major feature is the increased contribution of Russian academics and researcher to English language journals and research papers that is also representative of a greater focus on international collaboration in a number of research areas. Answering AVM Faaiz Amir's first question regarding Russia's role, Dr. Issaev stated that Russia understands that certain regions (such as the Middle East and South Asia) are highly complex with a lot of factors and relations that need to be taken into account. Russia also has great experience in conflict resolution and understands the nuances of it in different contexts. While Russia has no desire to be number one in the region there is still a huge potential for Russia to play a more prominent role in the region.

Lt. General (R) Asad Durrani (Security Analyst) offering his comments on the discussion by drawing on his past experience and role in Pakistan's intelligence apparatus during and immediately after the Afghan war, apprised the audience of some of the historical nuances that are associated with Pakistan-Russia Relations. Specifically, on the ongoing cooperation between Russia and Pakistan as part the Afghan peace process, Lt. Gen. Durrani apprised the audience of how perhaps the foundations of certain back channels were laid during the 1990's. He also offered a similar opinion on the formation of the SCO whose very essence was set on the historic processes that were set in motion following the end of the Cold War.



Mr. Raza Khan (Correspondent PTV News) in a direct question to the Russian ambassador asked what role was the Russian embassy is playing with regard to promoting greater Pak-Russia ties, compared to other embassies of Western capitals which were perhaps more active. He mentioned the lack of opportunities for journalists and/or businessmen in terms of embassy sponsored organized visits to Russia. The Russian ambassador responded by stating quite clearly that 'we do not give, we facilitate.' He explained that if there was something which

businessmen and/or journalists wanted to do in this regard, it had to be done themselves to which the Russian embassy can help support and facilitate. He mentioned how the embassy had recently helped facilitate the visit of a prominent newspaper editor from Pakistan as well as provided assistance and information for Pakistani businessmen on a number of business and investment related expos being held in Russia.

In the end Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema invited the Chief Guest H.E. Danila V. Ganich who welcomed the SVI's initiative in setting up the seminar. He appreciated that there were serious people gathered at the discussion including some prominent scholars and academicians from Russia. He stated that in his view, Russia considered itself a great country with respect to its own self-image and projection of itself. He stated that Russia was well poised and set to change a lot more in the



next 10-15 years considering its current trajectory and approach to foreign policy. Speaking on its relations with other countries, the ambassador emphasized that Russia was not imposing its will on any country nor was it imposing its friendship. There neither was nor is any such compulsion from Russia. In the same way Russia can develop on its own as its growth is not as conditional to its relations with other countries; that's how great Russia is.

He did state however, that Pakistan was extremely important especially considering its key role in the region as well as its potential heading into the future. There are a number of areas where both countries' interests are aligned. This for instance was evident in the increased military cooperation that has taken place over the last few years involving the sale of the Mi-35M attack helicopters as well as the regularly held *Druzhba* (friendship) military exercises. The most recent ones of which were held in Russia which focused on special ops drills and exercises earlier this year.

Speaking on his view of the destabilizing role being played by the United States, the ambassador was adamant in stating that the US was systematically dismantling key checks and balances within the international system. This was evident in the US's unilateral withdrawal

from the INF and ABM treaties based on rubbish excuses that Russia had done so first. The same was evident in Afghanistan as well where the US was offering lame excuses over its failure to bring about a peaceful settlement to its invasion and now that it needed to withdraw its forces. This stood in marked contrast to Russia's approach and support for international organizations as part of contributing to a rules based international order. He emphatically stated that Russia does not bully. The unipolar world order was characterized by unilateral bullying. He stated that Pakistan too has been at the receiving end of such bullying, reminding the audience of when Richard Armitage, following 9/11, had flown in and threatened to bomb Pakistan back to the stone-age. This is the kind of world order which promotes such bullying and is what needs to be done away with.

At the end Dr. Zafar Iqbal Cheema offered his profound thanks to all the participants, especially to the Chief Guest H.E. Danila V. Ganich for his candid talk and for responding positively to the SVI's invitation on such a short notice. He thanked the visiting Russian delegation for their detailed and enlightening talks and also appreciated the audience for their active participation in the question and answer session and making the seminar more lively and informative. Dr. Cheema also thanked the whole team of the SVI for making all the arrangements for the seminar and contributing to its success.

Media Coverage:

The event was covered by the PTV World News

<https://www.facebook.com/svicom/videos/962550054085757/>