

Pakistan-Russia Relations in Changing Geostrategic Environment

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Abstract

Historically, due to Cold War politics, Pakistan and Russia have not enjoyed a long-term constructive relationship. However, changing geostrategic environment, which is marred with great power competition and changing alliances, has created an enabling environment for Pakistan and Russia to bridge the divergences and construct a pathway toward a strategic partnership. Over the last two decades, Pakistan and Russia have significantly improved their relations and cooperated in several areas such as counter-terrorism, Afghanistan, military-to-military engagement, economy and diplomacy. Despite the relationship being nascent, it currently has the potential to develop into a long-term strategic one, if both sides overcome existing challenges through diplomatic efforts, expand current areas of cooperation and find new avenues of bilateral engagement.

Keywords: Great Power Competition, Net Security Provider, Balance Relationship, Security Dilemma, Strategic Partnership, Pakistan, Russia.

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Introduction

Throughout history, the relations between Pakistan and Russia passed through many ups and downs due to Cold War politics and the post-Cold War international environment. Pakistan's tilt towards the US, Afghan jihad and the issue of terrorism hampered the prospects of the two countries getting closer. Despite the uneasiness in bilateral relationship in the past, there were times when both countries cooperated in diverse fields. The establishment of Pakistan's Steel Mill and Guddu Thermal power station in the 70s and 80s with the help of the Soviet Union is a testament to this fact.

Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's former President, visit to Russia in 2003 proved to be the icebreaker in the bilateral relationship.² Though, the relations are still facing difficulties even after 20 years of that visit, but in between these years, both countries have taken many significant steps that brought them closer. These steps include lifting of the ban by Russia on arms sales to Pakistan, Russian support for Islamabad's induction in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a permanent member and the settlement of Soviet-era trade dispute. After lifting the arms embargo, Pakistan purchased four MI-35 attack helicopters and two non-combatant MI-171E helicopters from Moscow.³ In 2015, Pakistan also signed a deal with Russia to import Klimov RD-93 engines for the JF-17 Thunder aircraft.⁴ Most recently, Pakistan received its first shipment of Russian crude oil at a discounted price. PM

² "President Vladimir Putin held negotiations with President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan in Moscow on a three-day visit", President of Russia, last modified Feb 5, 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/28108>

³ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Pakistan Receives 4 Advanced Attack Helicopters From Russia", *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/pakistan-receives-4-advanced-attack-helicopters-from-russia/>

⁴ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Pakistan to Stick With Russian Engine for JF-17 Fighter Jet", *The Diplomat*, November 25, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/pakistan-to-stick-with-russian-engine-for-jf-17-fighter-jet/>

of Pakistan, Shehbaz Sharif, termed it the beginning of a new relationship between the two countries.⁵

In the past decade, Pakistan and Russia have come closer to each other and reduced the trust deficit significantly. Current Moscow-Islamabad relations are developing under the changing geopolitical environment. Russia is looking for new avenues in South Asia under its Look East policy, announced in 2010 as its relations with the US and EU continued to deteriorate.⁶ Meanwhile, Islamabad is seeking new partners to diversify its foreign policy because of geopolitical realignment at the international level. Pakistan is also looking to use its important geostrategic location, magnified significantly by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crown jewel of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁷

The current geostrategic environment is allowing both countries to take this budding relationship forward. Therefore, this paper will give an overview of how the current global environment, in which major countries are engaged in great power competition, is bringing Russia and Pakistan closer. It will also highlight challenges and areas of convergence between the two states and the way forward.

Geostrategic Environment

The current geostrategic environment is marked by great power competition. This competition involves three major powers, US, China

⁵ “Pakistan gets first shipment of Russian crude under the discount deal,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/12/pakistan-gets-first-shipment-of-russian-crude-under-discount-deal#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%93%20Pakistan%20has%20received,significant%20benefit%20to%20domestic%20consumers>.

⁶ Najimdeen Bakare, “Contextualizing Russia and South Asia Relations through Putin’s Look East Policy,” *Journal of Asia and African Studies* 56, no. 3, (May 2021): 676

⁷ Brig (Retd) Feroz Hassan Khan, “Russia–Pakistan Strategic Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2473361/russiapakistan-strategic-relations-an-emerging-entente-cordiale/>

and Russia. The US feels that its global post-Cold War pre-eminence is being challenged by the rise of China and the renewed Russian desire to find a greater role in global politics. However, unlike Cold War, this time the US feels that its major competitor and challenger is China as compared to Russia. As per the 2022 US National Defence Strategy Fact Sheet, China is a strategic challenger and Russia is an acute threat for the U.S.⁸ Secretary of State, Antony Blinken also believes that China is currently the only country with the entire wherewithal to reshape the rules-based international order constructed after two world wars.⁹

Therefore, to contain China, the US is shaping the strategic environment around Beijing to advance its interest in protecting the Western-constructed international order. To succeed in this objective, the US follows the "invest, align and compete" strategy.¹⁰ This strategy encapsulates strengthening US competitiveness and aligning Washington's efforts with its allies worldwide to compete with China. The main focus of the US in its strategy of competing with China is Indo-Pacific because it believes that China is the region's main threat. According to the 2022 US Indo-Pacific Strategy, China is using all elements of power at its disposal to become the Indo-Pacific and world power.¹¹ The strategy further states that US will focus on the Indo-Pacific region and strengthen its alliance with Australia, Japan, South Korea and India.¹² This strategy has also led to the emergence of new alliances in

⁸ "Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defence Strategy," U.S. Department of Defense, accessed June 26, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>

⁹ "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China," US Department of State, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

¹⁰ "The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China", US Department of State."

¹¹ "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," The White House, last modified February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

¹² "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," The White House.

the form of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)¹³ and Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US (AUKUS)¹⁴ partnership.

On the other hand, China and Russia are getting closer to countering US encroachment in their areas of strategic interests and moving towards a multi-polar world. Their desire for a multi-polar world order is visible in their official statements. In a recent meeting in March 2023, both Chinese and Russian leaders committed to support the world's multi-polarity.¹⁵ For this, they have been cooperating in several areas such as diplomacy, economy, military, etc. As per the detailed statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, China and Russia have stayed in close communication and coordination in the UN, SCO, BRICS, the G20 and other multilateral forums, and worked together for a multi-polar world and greater democracy in international relations.¹⁶ In 2022, the bilateral trade between the two countries exceeded USD 190 billion; for the last 13 years, China has been the largest trading partner of Russia.¹⁷ Both countries cooperate in energy, aviation, space, scientific and technological innovation, e-commerce, etc.

On AUKUS and QUAD, both countries share similar concerns as well. China believes that QUAD is an exclusive bloc aimed at its containment and AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation constitutes

¹³ Sheila A. Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, May 27, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know>

¹⁴ "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS," The White House, last modified March 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/13/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus-2/>

¹⁵ "President Xi Jinping Meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin," Chinese Foreign Ministry, last modified March 21, 2023,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202303/t20230321_11045496.html

¹⁶ "President Xi Jinping Meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin," Chinese Foreign Ministry.

¹⁷ "Forging Ahead to Open a New Chapter of China-Russia Friendship, Cooperation and Common Development", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, last modified March 20, 2023,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202303/t20230320_11044359.html

severe nuclear proliferation risks.¹⁸ It delivers a blow to the international non-proliferation regime, exacerbates arms race, and undermines regional peace and stability.¹⁹ Similarly, Russia has criticized QUAD for playing one country against another²⁰ and considered AUKUS a proliferation concern and fuelling tensions in the region.²¹

Even on the Russia-Ukraine war, China has not out rightly criticized Russia and has taken a balanced position. It has called for respecting the sovereignty of all countries, abandoning the Cold War mentality, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks and stopping unilateral sanctions.²² Furthermore, China has also offered to play a role in finding a political settlement of the Ukrainian-Russian dispute.²³

For Pakistan, this great power competition is forcing it to re-prioritize its foreign policy options. Pakistan's major concern in this great power competition is India's role as a regional net security provider against China. In 2009, the then US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, at Shangri-La Dialogue argued that US sees India as a net security

¹⁸ "Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation," Chinese Foreign Ministry, last modified June 8, 2022, http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/PressandMedia/Spokepersons/202206/t20220608_10699989.htm

¹⁹ "Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on AUKUS nuclear submarine cooperation," Chinese Foreign Ministry.

²⁰ "Russia features in anti-China Quad statement in India", *Dawn*, March 4, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1740305#:~:text=Russian%20Foreign%20Minister%20sergey%20Lavrov,of%20the%20East%20Asia%20summits>.

²¹ "Kremlin says AUKUS submarine deal raises proliferation questions", *Reuters*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kremlin-says-aukus-submarine-deal-raises-proliferation-questions-2023-03-14/>

²² "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis", Chinese Foreign Ministry, last modified February 24, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html

²³ Alexander Smith, "China's Xi has first talks with Ukraine's Zelenskyy since Russia's invasion", *NBC News*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-xi-talks-ukraine-zelenskyy-phone-russia-invasion-rcna81523>

provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond.²⁴ India was selected as the US Major Defence Partner in 2016 and later on in 2018, was given Strategic Trade Authorization tier 1 status.²⁵ This opened the gates for India to access a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by US Department of Commerce.²⁶ Furthermore, the Indo-US security cooperation has resulted in four foundational agreements such as “Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI)”, “Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)”, “Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)” and “Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)”.²⁷ These agreements will enhance India’s military situational awareness, preparedness and ability to plan precision strikes, creating a security dilemma for Pakistan.

India, in all this situation, is playing smartly. On the one hand, it is gaining favours from the US and other Western countries under the cover of becoming a net security provider. On the other hand, it is utilizing its strategic partnership with Russia to buy oil at a discounted price. India is also a part of BRICS, which includes China and Russia. Therefore, keeping this in mind, Pakistan must also operate smartly and diversify its relations by looking toward other major world powers, such as China and Russia, in this volatile geopolitical environment.

With China, Pakistan enjoys a strategic partnership, which is time-tested and spread in different domains from economy to military.

²⁴ Anit Mukherjee, “India as a Net Security Provider, Concept and Impediments”, Policy Brief, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, accessed May 12, 2023, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf

²⁵ Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with India,” U.S. Department of State, last modified January 20, 2021, [https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/#:~:text=U.S.%20India%20defense%20trade%20cooperation,\(ISA\)%20now%20in%20place.](https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/#:~:text=U.S.%20India%20defense%20trade%20cooperation,(ISA)%20now%20in%20place.)

²⁶ Fact Sheet, “U.S. Security Cooperation with India,” U.S. Department of State.

²⁷ Samran Ali, “Indo-US Foundational Agreements: Contributing to India’s Military Capabilities,” *Centre For Strategic And Contemporary Research* 18 (December, 2020): 1-6, <https://cscr.pk/pdf/perspectives/Indo-US-Foundational-Agreements-Contributing-to-India%E2%80%99s-Military-Capabilities.pdf>

While Islamabad's relations with Russia are improving and the recent bonhomie is a direct result of an emerging geopolitical tussle among major powers. Pakistan is facing difficulties in engaging with Russia because of US sanctions. When Pakistan-Russia signed an agreement to construct the North-South gas pipeline project known as Pak Stream Gas Pipeline Project, RT Global was nominated by the Russian side to complete the project. However, soon after the nomination, US imposed sanctions against RT Global in 2016, which halted the project.²⁸ In addition to that, there are some other challenges as well that may hinder the growth of this bilateral relationship.

Challenges

The India Factor. India is an important country for Russia. Both countries enjoyed good relations during the Cold War and India remained an important market for selling Russian military equipment. Though India is looking to diversify its military imports, Russia is still a top exporter of military equipment to New Delhi.²⁹ Furthermore, Russia is also supportive of India's membership of NSG and have time and again stated its readiness to facilitate the positive decision of the group in this matter.³⁰ The recent Russia-Ukraine crisis has led to stringent economic sanctions on Russia from the West. India, though is part of US led alliances but it is still buying oil from Russia despite Western sanctions on Moscow.³¹

²⁸ Zafar Bhutta, "Govt considers reviving Pakistan-Russia gas pipeline project", *Express Tribune*, February 2, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2398903/govt-considers-reviving-pakistan-russia-gas-pipeline-project>

²⁹ Devjyot Ghoshal and Aftab Ahmed, "India, world's biggest buyer of Russian arms, look to diversify suppliers," *Reuters*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-worlds-biggest-buyer-russian-arms-looks-diversify-suppliers-2022-05-18/>

³⁰ "Joint statement on the visit of President of the Russian Federation to India for 15th Annual India-Russia Summit," Press Information Bureau, India, last modified December 11, 2014, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=113125>

³¹ "India's Russian oil imports jump 50 times; now accounts for 10% of all import: Official," *The Economic Times*, Jun 23, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/indias-russian-oil-imports-jump-50-times-now-accounts-for-10-of-all-import-official/articleshow/92417120.cms>

Given the nature of Pakistan – India relationship, India would not accept Russia and Pakistan developing their relations. This may limit bilateral Russian-Pakistani cooperation. There is a positive public perception of India in Russia. Many Russian tourists visit India and get inspired by its traditional heritage and soft power. As a result, the Russian public support pro-Indian positions when choosing between India and Pakistan.³²

The US Factor. The relationship between the US and Russia remained volatile even after the Cold War. President Putin, ever since coming into power, has focused on regaining the lost great power status of the Russian Federation. This has put these two countries at odds with each other. In this situation, countries like Pakistan are caught between the two giants. During Cold War, Pakistan sided with the US, which made Pakistan a close ally of the US. The current geopolitical changes at the international level have forced Pakistan to diversify its relationship, including improving ties with Russia. Considering the current state of US Russia relations, Washington will not let any country get closer to Russia, especially when it is an important country like Pakistan. Therefore, under the current geopolitical situation and considering US historical rivalry with Russia, Pakistan will be under a lot of pressure from the West, particularly from the US, to avoid getting closer to Russia. Overcoming this pressure, considering that US is the biggest export market for Pakistan will be a challenge.³³

People-to-People Contact. There has been less people-to-people contact between Russia and Pakistan. Pakistan's alignment with the US during the Cold War left a lasting impression on common citizens and officials of Russian Federation and created a lack of trust between the citizens of the two countries. Not many Russians and Pakistanis know

³² Oleg Barabanov, "Russia and the Search for Balance Between India and Pakistan", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 4 Mar 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-india-pakistan/>

³³ "US remains top destination of Pak exports with 43pc growth: Dawood," *Daily Times*, Jan 5 2022, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/863977/us-remains-top-destination-of-pak-exports-with-43pc-growth-dawood/>

each other's language. This language barrier also limits cultural exchanges, which reduces the possibilities for people from both countries to learn and appreciate each other's cultures. There are few scholarship opportunities available in the education sector in Russia for Pakistani students compared to Europe or the US, which also limits the interaction between the students of the two countries. Despite recent efforts to increase bilateral trade, the trade volume between the two countries is relatively small. Thus, improving the bilateral relationship will remain a challenge with this state of people-to-people contact.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict. Pakistan has enjoyed good relations with Ukraine since the 1990s that included arms trade. Now after the Russia-Ukrainian conflict, Pakistan is facing a serious dilemma. On one side, Pakistan is eager to develop its relationship with Russia, while on the other hand, it wants to maintain U.S. support. The U.S. urged countries to support sanctions on Russia³⁴ and warns of consequences if any state tries to evade these.³⁵ Pakistan also came under similar pressure when 22 Western diplomats stationed in Pakistan signed a statement urging Pakistan to "denounce Russia's invasion on Ukraine and back international calls for Moscow to immediately stop the war".³⁶ It seems that Pakistan is caught in a diplomatic uncertainty that is hampering Pakistan to make a dedicated stride toward Russia in terms of improving political and economic relations, hence affecting the bilateral relationship.

The current Russia-Ukraine crisis has divided the world, and many Western countries openly criticize Russia for its action against

³⁴ Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, "Biden Enlists Asian Partners for Unprecedented Russia Sanctions Plans," *Foreign Policy*, Feb 22, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/22/biden-russia-ukraine-sanctions-asia-allies-export-controls-invasion-plans/>

³⁵ "Ukraine crisis: US warns China against helping Russia," *BBC News*, Mar 14 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-60732486>

³⁶ "Western-Led Pressure Grows on Pakistan to Condemn Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Voice of America*, Mar 1, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/western-led-pressure-grows-on-pakistan-to-condemn-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine/6465104.html>

Ukraine. On the contrary, Pakistan has taken a balanced approach and called for an “immediate ending of hostilities and stressed the need for diplomacy and dialogue for an early, negotiated end to the Ukraine conflict.”³⁷ This shows importance of Russia in Pakistan’s foreign policy priorities.

Areas of Cooperation

Counter-terrorism and peace and stability in Afghanistan are currently the two main areas of cooperation between Pakistan and Russia that can drive this relationship forward. Under the counter-terrorism domain, both countries regularly conduct bilateral military exercises, commonly known as Druzhba (friendship), since 2016. The latest of this bilateral exercise was held in Russia in October 2021.³⁸ This exercise focused on counter-terrorism, adopting best practices in this domain.³⁹ Pakistan and Russia, both permanent members of SCO, have also been participating in multilateral counter-terrorism exercises under the SCO banner.⁴⁰

US withdrawal from Afghanistan and takeover by the Taliban have made the situation uncertain for Russia. Their major concerns regarding Afghanistan are the “spill-over of terrorism” and “drug trafficking” to the Central Asian States that can ultimately affect Russian security. Pakistan, which shares a long border with Afghanistan, has similar concerns and has stated many times that peace and stability in Pakistan is dependent on stability in Afghanistan. Therefore peace and

³⁷ “Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar, participated in High-Level International Donor's Conference for Ukraine,” MoFA Pakistan, May 6, 2022, <https://mofa.gov.pk/mos-khar-participated-in-high-level-international-donors-conference-for-ukraine/>

³⁸ “Pak-Russia joint military exercise Druzhba-VI concludes,” *Express Tribune*, October 9, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2324042/pak-russia-joint-military-exercise-druzhba-vi-concludes>.

³⁹ “Pak-Russia joint military exercise Druzhba-VI concludes.

⁴⁰ “Pakistan Army participates in ‘Peace Mission’ joint exercise in Russia,” *Express Tribune*, September 22, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2321393/pakistan-army-participates-in-peace-mission-joint-exercise-in-russia>.

stability in Afghanistan is a common ground for interactions between Pakistan and Russia. The latest meeting on Afghanistan between the two countries was held in April 2023, on the side line of “4th Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan Meeting”.⁴¹ During this interaction, both countries emphasized on the importance of consultation on the promotion of shared objective of making Afghanistan a peaceful, stable and sovereign state.⁴²

Islamabad and Moscow also hold regular talks under the banner of the "Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability," established in 2002.⁴³ The 13th meeting of this group was held in Islamabad in March 2019, in which, issues such as, "non-militarization of outer space, upholding bilateral and multilateral treaties, and developments in the field of information and telecommunication in the context of international security" were discussed.⁴⁴ Both states shared unanimity of views on all matters that came under discussion. On 22 May 2019, Pakistan and Russia in a joint statement, pledged "No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space."⁴⁵ Complementing the agreed position regarding the prevention of an arms race in outer space. Pakistan

⁴¹ "Pakistan, Russia to work closely for promoting the shared objective of peaceful Afghanistan," Radio Pakistan, last modified April 13, 2023, <https://www.radio.gov.pk/13-04-2023/hina-khar-sergey-lavrov-exchange-views-on-entire-spectrum-of-bilateral-regional-global-issues#:~:text=Pakistan%2C%20Russia%20to%20work%20closely%20for%20promoting%20shared%20objective%20of%20peaceful%20Afghanistan&text=Pakistan%20and%20Russia%20have%20agreed,stable%2C%20sovereign%20and%20prosperous%20Afghanistan..>

⁴² "Pakistan, Russia to work closely for promoting the shared objective of peaceful Afghanistan," Radio Pakistan.

⁴³ Muhammad Hanif, "Pakistan-Russia Relations: Progress. Prospect and Constrains," *IPRI Journal* 13, no.2 (2013):71

⁴⁴ "Meeting of Pakistan- Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability," MoFA Pakistan, last modified March 28, 2021, <https://mofa.gov.pk/meeting-of-pakistan-russia-consultative-group-on-strategic-stability/>

⁴⁵ "Pakistan and Russia sign Joint Statement on No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space," MoFA Pakistan, last modified May 22, 2019, <https://mofa.gov.pk/pakistan-and-russia-sign-joint-statement-on-no-first-placement-of-weapons-in-outer-space/>

and Russia are working collectively towards this end at various international forums.

On the economic front, both countries have shown interest in increasing bilateral trade, which currently stands at \$730 million.⁴⁶ The settlement of Soviet-era trade disputes in 2019 was perhaps the clearest signal of mutual commitment to deepen economic ties.⁴⁷ Pakistan paid \$93.5 million to Russia, clearing the path for a fresh start of economic engagement.⁴⁸ Pakistan's major exports to Russia include "cotton, textiles, leather, synthetic fabrics, rice, fruits, surgical and sports goods", while Russia's exports to Pakistan are "fertilizers, chemical elements and compounds, rubber, tyres and tubes, paper and paper board, iron and steel (raw and manufactured products) and machinery".⁴⁹

In 2020, after the "Russia-Pakistan Technical Committee" meeting, both countries renewed the discussion on North-South Gas Pipeline Project. The project was initially signed in 2015 but did not make any progress because of Western sanctions on Russian companies. However, the project has been renamed as the Pak Stream Gas Pipeline Project (PSGP) and scheduled to be completed in 2023.⁵⁰ The 1,100 kilometres pipeline will transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) from terminals in Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore.⁵¹ On 20 January 2023, both

⁴⁶ "Pakistan Ambassador to Russia, Shafqat Ali Khan, speaking at a webinar "Russia-Pakistan Cooperation: Regional Interests and Global Context," Strategic Vision Institute, Mar 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gBGuRH2qzY>

⁴⁷ "Pakistan settles Soviet-era trade dispute with Russia," *Express Tribune*, Nov 7, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2095099/pakistan-settles-decades-old-trade-dispute-russia>

⁴⁸ "Pakistan settles Soviet-era trade dispute with Russia."

⁴⁹ "Pakistan-Russia Relations," Embassy of Pakistan, Moscow, accessed on Jul 14, 2022, <http://paremoscow.com/en/pakistan-russia-relations/>

⁵⁰ Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi, "Russia-Pakistan Economic Relations: Energy Partnership and the China Factor," ISAS Working Paper, last modified Oct 6, 2021, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/russia-pakistan-economic-relations-energy-partnership-and-the-china-factor/#_ftn1

⁵¹ "Pakistan, Russia sign pact for 1,100-km gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore," *Business Standard*, 16 Jul 2021, <https://www.business->

sides agreed to work on a “Comprehensive Plan for Energy Cooperation and agreed to consider Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline Project as a comprehensive infrastructure under energy cooperation”.⁵²

Though this cooperation is encouraging but it has the potential to grow further. Russia is a world leader in natural gas exports and the second-largest oil exporter.⁵³ While on the other hand, Pakistan is facing an energy crisis. Pakistan has a gas shortfall of “1.5 billion cubic feet per day, expected to double by 2025”.⁵⁴ Therefore, Pakistan can overcome its energy crisis by importing gas/oil from Russia on low cost.

Way Forward

Interestingly, both sides have strong political will to take this nascent relationship forward. Pakistan needs to strike a balance in its relationship with Russia and the West. Pakistan, just like India, should confidently put its case in front of the world that Pakistan's cooperation with Russia is in the interest of its people as they are facing economic and energy difficulties. Pakistan is not looking to become part of any grouping and is interested in forming relations with all countries under a win-win approach instead of a zero-sum game. Furthermore, its relations with one country will not come at the cost of another. Russia should also consider striking a balance between its relations with India and Pakistan. Any economic cooperation between India and Russia is a non-issue for Pakistan, but military cooperation can create a security dilemma for

[standard.com/article/international/pakistan-russia-sign-pact-for-1-100-km-gas-pipeline-from-karachi-to-lahore-121071600905_1.html](https://www.standard.com/article/international/pakistan-russia-sign-pact-for-1-100-km-gas-pipeline-from-karachi-to-lahore-121071600905_1.html)

⁵² “Joint Statement of the 8th Session of Pakistan-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation Islamabad: January 20, 2023,” Press Information Department, accessed May 29, 2023.

http://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/21886

⁵³ “Energy Fact Sheet: Why does Russian oil and gas matter?,” International Energy Agency, last modified March 21, 2022, <https://www.iea.org/articles/energy-fact-sheet-why-does-russian-oil-and-gas-matter>

⁵⁴ Muhammad Athar Javed, “Growing Pakistan-Russia Relations: Future of Economic & Strategic Cooperation,” Valdai Discussion club, last modified Feb 23, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/growing-pakistan-russia-relations-future/>

Pakistan. In its engagement with Russian officials, Pakistan should sensitize them about Pakistan's security concerns emanating from India-Russia military cooperation. It is also in the interest of Russia to have a balanced relationship with both India and Pakistan because Russia is looking 'East' and for that, both Pakistan and India are important countries, which are also SCO members and none can be ignored.

There is a great potential to increase economic cooperation between the two countries as European countries are looking to reduce their dependence on Russian energy supplies after the Ukraine crisis and Moscow is looking East amid Western sanctions. While India and China are making the most of new discounted oil prices from Russia, Pakistan is a bit behind on this initiative. Though the first shipment of discounted Russian oil has arrived in Pakistan, it should be made a permanent feature of Pakistan-Russia relations, considering the impending energy crisis in Pakistan. This will create confidence in Moscow that Pakistan is willing to go an extra mile in its relations with Russia despite international pressure.

Furthermore, both countries should work together to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan because its location can act as a bridge between Central and South Asia. This will help Pakistan and Russia towards achieving the full potential of economic cooperation. There are several areas where both countries can cooperate, such as "trade and investment, energy, communication and transport, higher education, industry, improving rail and road infrastructure, finance and banking sector, customs, agriculture, science and technology, and information technology."⁵⁵ A peaceful Afghanistan can provide safe and secure transit and trade routes between Russia and Pakistan. The road and infrastructure development in Afghanistan would facilitate the movement of goods and services, leading to increased bilateral trade. Furthermore, Afghanistan's

⁵⁵ "Joint Statement of the 8th Session of Pakistan-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation Islamabad: January 20, 2023," Press Information Department.

stability can create a favourable environment for Russia and Pakistan to explore the country's energy resources together. This will benefit all three countries, including Afghanistan as well.

Currently, the defence cooperation between Pakistan and Russia remains mostly concentrated in the anti-terrorism domain. However, the situation in Afghanistan is providing a ground for two militaries to engage further. The intelligence agencies of both countries can coordinate and cooperate by sharing important information, which will help in pre-empting any terrorist threat. This will create trust between the two militaries and help overcome past disenchantment.

It is interesting to note that China-Russia-Pakistan's interests align in this contemporary environment, where all three favour a multi-polar world order. Furthermore, the world is witnessing the emergence of new partnerships and alliances in the form of QUAD and AUKUS. These alliances will give countries like India and Australia a greater role in the region. However, these alliances could have serious security implications for China, Russia and Pakistan. For Pakistan, the presence of India in QUAD could threaten its security interests in the region. India could use its presence in the QUAD to increase its military build-up and use AUKUS as a template to gain similar favours from the US and UK under the banner of countering China. This would create a serious security dilemma for Pakistan, increasing military competition and regional instability. For China, the emergence of QUAD and AUKUS is a direct threat to its strategic interest and Russia has also stated that U.S and its allies are creating blocs such as QUAD and AUKUS based on anti-Russian and anti-Chinese principles.⁵⁶

Therefore, the emergence of such blocs gives China, Russia and Pakistan an opportunity to explore options that may safeguard their

⁵⁶ Anirban Bhaumik, "Russia slams Quad after India defends it", *Deccan Herald*, Aug 22, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/international/world-news-politics/russia-slams-quad-after-india-defends-it-1138147.html>

interests. This potential trilateral partnership can allow Pakistan and Russia to come closer and discuss the security implications of QUAD and AUKUS and move forward in a bilateral relationship.

In addition, China, Russia, and Pakistan share concerns about regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan. They have held trilateral meetings and consultations to discuss peace efforts, support political reconciliation, and promote stability in Afghanistan. The three countries have collaborated in hosting talks and negotiations between Afghan parties to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Furthermore, Russia and China have shown interest in connecting BRI with Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and for that Afghanistan's stability is crucial. If this happens, it will connect two important regions of the world. Pakistan can also benefit from this as CPEC is a flagship project of BRI and through CPEC, Islamabad can play the role of bridge between China and Russia. Connecting the BRI and the EAEU can create a trade and transportation network, facilitating trade among Pakistan, China, Russia, and other countries in the region. The EAEU consists of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan; therefore, by connecting with the EAEU, Pakistan can enter into this market. It would also provide opportunities for Pakistan to expand and increase its export volumes in the EAEU member states. This will further strengthen the relationship between Islamabad and Moscow.

There is also a need to create a positive image in the public opinion of both countries by conducting purposeful interactions. Academics, students and policymakers should hear each other and discuss historical and contemporary problems to overcome them. People from both countries should be encouraged to learn each other's language and incentives should be given through scholarships to students and young professionals. This will increase people-to-people contact and may lead to cultural exchanges between the two countries, reducing the trust deficit and improving bilateral relationships.

Conclusion

Historically, Pakistan and Russia did not enjoy a healthy relationship. Still, the current geostrategic environment, marred with great power competition and changing alliances, is giving both countries a new opportunity to bury their past and start a new chapter. At the moment, the bilateral relations are moving in the right direction and there is also a political will and desire on both sides to convert this nascent relationship into a strategic one, but it will take some time. Despite many convergences, some challenges must be addressed to take the relationship in the right direction. There is a need to adopt a proactive foreign policy from both sides, free from any external factor and truly aimed at improving the relationship. This thinking will greatly help take the current trajectory of Pakistan-Russia relations toward new heights.