

The Russia-Pakistan Rapprochement: Should India Worry?

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ABSTRACT A rapprochement of sorts seems to be underway between two countries important to India's foreign policy calculus—its long-time partner and primary supplier of arms, Russia, and a neighbour with which it has had hostile relations, Pakistan. Beginning with a thaw in the 2000s, the two countries appear to have taken their relationship to the next level with the recent transfer of MI-35 helicopters to Pakistan from Russia. What are the forces driving this new outreach between the two countries? And what are the implications for India? This paper argues that Russia-Pakistan relations are unlikely to develop into a true strategic partnership given India's leverage over Russia, the historical memory of Russia-India ties, and Pakistan's own relations with the US and China. Still, India must remain wary of this new dynamic in Russia-Pakistan ties and tailor its policies accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

In yet another sign of the recent warming of ties between them, Russia and Pakistan signed an agreement in October 2015 to build a gas pipeline connecting LPG terminals in Lahore to terminals in Karachi. The 1,100-km long pipeline, scheduled to be completed in 2018, is expected to cost \$2 billion, the entirety of which will be shouldered by Russia. Using the Build, Own Operate Transfer Model, the Russian company RT Global Resources will build the pipeline and use it for 25 years, after which it will be handed over to Pakistan. The deal is expected to help Pakistan

fulfil its energy requirements. Signs of a thaw between Moscow and Islamabad were first publicly noticed in 2009 when the idea of a quadrilateral of Russia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan was floated to increase regional security and economic cooperation. Though the quadrilateral held three summit meetings, it did not take off. In fact, Russian President Vladimir Putin was expected to visit Islamabad in 2012 for the fourth summit but cancelled the visit. There has been, however, a flurry of other high-level visits between 2011 and 2015—President Asif Ali Zardari visited Russia in 2011, for example, and Pakistan's Army Chief Ashraf Kayani visited

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Moscow in October 2012. There were also reciprocal visits by Foreign Ministers, Air Force Chiefs, and other high-ranking officials.

However, it was only in 2014 that the seriousness of these contacts became apparent with the November visit to Islamabad by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, during which the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement.

Following this, in June 2015, a deal was finalised for Russia to sell four MI-35 attack helicopters to Pakistan. To stymie India's objections, Russia argued that the helicopters would be used in anti-terrorist operations against the Taliban. This is not the first time military supplies have been transferred from Russia to Pakistan; in 2002, Russia had supplied Pakistan several MI-17 helicopters, overriding India's objections.

Further, the two countries are now discussing coordination of efforts against terrorism and narcotics trafficking. The two countries have already collaborated in outer-space exploration when a Russian space vehicle launched the Pakistani telecommunication satellite Al Badr in 2001.¹ Russia has also helped to refurbish the Pakistan Steel Mills, the country's only steel plant built by Russia in the 1970s.

India has concerns about the scope of this re-engagement between Pakistan and Russia, considering that Russia and Pakistan had tepid relations through most of the Cold War. At that time, Pakistan was clearly aligned to the US, the chief geopolitical threat to the Soviet Union.

This paper gives an account of the history of Russia-Pakistan relations. It also looks at the possible motives behind what appears to be a Pakistan-Russia rapprochement and examines its possible implications for India.

RUSSIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

Russia and Pakistan have never really had warm relations. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, then Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was invited by both the Soviet Union and the US. He

chose to visit the US, mainly because the US had more capacity to help Pakistan economically.² During the Cold War, Soviet-Pakistan relations were marred not only by Pakistan's alliance with the US—being a member of both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)—but also by the China-Pakistan nexus (after the Sino-Soviet split) and by Russia's *de facto* alliance with India in the 1970s. In fact, this alliance is seen as the enabler of India's liberation of Bangladesh.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pakistan played a key role in training the Mujahideen who fought against the USSR. This completed the rupture between the two countries.

As the Cold War ended in 1990 and new opportunities for engagement emerged—owing to the dramatically transformed geopolitical situation and domestic changes—Russia-Pakistan relations remained fragile and strained.³ In Afghanistan, while Pakistan supported the Taliban, Russia and India supported the Northern Alliance. Pakistan's unsavoury record on nuclear proliferation also unsettled Russia and created distrust of Pakistan. Moreover, Russia was concerned about the presence of Chechen separatists and Central Asian militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the same time, with India and Russia's special relationship continuing even after the Cold War and with Russia's support of India's position on Kashmir, Pakistan saw little to gain from improving ties with Russia.

Thus, ties between Islamabad and Moscow have traditionally been constrained by their respective partnerships with Washington and Delhi. In the last couple of years, however, Islamabad and Moscow have started moving closer to each other, because of differences between Washington and Islamabad and the growing closeness between Washington and New Delhi.

This shift in their policies was reflected in 2012 when Pakistan's Foreign Minister visited Russia to discuss various issues such as the future

of Afghanistan, energy trade, aircraft sales, and helping revive the Pakistan Steel Mills, the country's only steel plant built by Russia in the 1970s.⁴ The visit was followed by that of the Chief of Army Staff to discuss defence acquisitions. Then in 2014 came the reports about the sale of combat helicopters to Pakistan, and in 2015, news about the construction of the Lahore-Karachi pipeline. Also, in early 2015, unsubstantiated reports said that Russia had agreed to let Pakistan import Klimov RD-93 engines for the JF-17 aircraft which it jointly manufactures with China, which previously used to be imported from Russia via China.⁵ Islamabad has indicated it is interested in a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, President Putin's pet project. These are not isolated, insignificant incidents; rather, they show a pattern of increasing proximity between Russia and Pakistan. What are their motives in moving closer to each other, shedding the distrust they mutually nurtured over many decades?

RUSSIA'S MOTIVES

Russia's interest in Pakistan today can be primarily attributed to the latter's strategic location next to Afghanistan and, by extension, Central Asia. Though the two countries do not share borders, they share the same geopolitical space. Russia has long regarded Pakistan as the 'troublemaker' in the region because of its alleged patronage of terrorist networks.⁶ One of its objectives is therefore to convince Pakistan to moderate the Taliban and to subdue radical Islamic forces within Pakistan.⁷ It believes that Pakistan has the capacity to considerably rein in the Taliban and other Islamic militant movements in the region, which it sees as critical for its own security.

Moreover, as Pakistan is a large and influential Muslim country and Russia has a large Muslim population of its own, Moscow sees benefit in improved bilateral relations.

Russia regards Pakistan to be a necessary part of any long-term solution in Afghanistan; it is key

to a stable Afghanistan. With China endorsing a Pakistani role in deciding Afghanistan's future, Russia sees little scope for opposing Pakistan's role in Afghanistan.

Further, with the drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan beginning in December 2014, Russia hopes to create strategic space for itself in the region. Russia's turn towards Pakistan also finds a fit with its own pivot to Asia, through which it wants to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific region.

Russia hopes that improving ties with Pakistan gives it leverage at two levels. One, it will obtain an advantage on issues of terrorism and on Afghanistan by building better relations with Islamabad. It also wishes to capitalise on the differences between the US and Pakistan to carve out a role for itself in the region. Second, Russia is also of the view that building better relations with Pakistan will partially counter any alignment between India and the US and could help impede India from getting too close to the US.⁸

With India diversifying its basket of arms supplies—and, in particular, reaching out to the US and Israel as sources of advanced military technology—Russia believes that it is justified in looking for new markets for its arms and technology as it derives large revenues from its energy and arms exports. Moscow is convinced that it can supply arms and military technology to both India and Pakistan, *ala* France and the US.

Russia wants a land route, which will give it access to the warm-water ports in the Arabian Sea: Pakistan is best placed to meet such demand.⁹ This could also open up new opportunities for the landlocked countries of Central Asia.

Finally, Russia's overtures to Pakistan could be part of its strategy to develop new partnerships. Since the Ukraine crisis, Russia has been isolated in the international sphere and has few friends left. In fact, one driving imperative of Russian foreign policy in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis is now to reach out to new friends and partners who can help it challenge the West. Russia is also hunting for new defence and energy markets because of sanctions and isolation by the West.¹⁰

PAKISTAN'S MOTIVES

Pakistan, for its part, wants to build better relations with Russia to increase its leverage with the US. Given the recent tensions between the US and Pakistan and between the US and Russia, Pakistan wants to prove to the US that it has other strategic options which might not necessarily be to the US' liking. It is also seeking to reduce its dependence on the US, given their differences over Afghanistan and the US' use of drones against terrorists in Pakistan, among other factors. After the US operation in 2011 to kill Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad in Pakistan, and its subsequent attack on a Pakistani base that killed two dozen soldiers, Pakistan's media and analysts agreed that the end of American hegemony is near and that their country should adjust to and exploit a G-Zero world.¹¹ Pakistan does not want to be cornered in a situation where it is overly allied with the US and too dependent on it.

In fact, the growing closeness between India and the US has also prompted Pakistan to look for new friends and partners. Pakistan would also like to drive a wedge in the traditional relations between Russia and India by improving ties with Russia and by playing on Russia's insecurities vis-à-vis India's improved relations with the US. It also has its eyes on obtaining military supplies and technology from Russia, which it judges to be of much superior quality to what it receives from either China, Turkey, or Ukraine.

Pakistan seeks commercial gains from improved relations with Russia. The Lahore-Karachi pipeline, for one, will resolve some of its energy problems. It will also help it develop its infrastructure. There are reports that Russia will help modernise Pakistan Steel Mills. Other reports indicate that Russia may also join Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the CASA-1000 energy project, providing Afghanistan and Pakistan with electricity.¹² Russia's natural resources and technology are an added incentive for Pakistan in its industrialisation goals.

THE CHINA FACTOR?

Some analysts speculate that the overtures between Russia and Pakistan are born out of both countries' close ties with China. Russia is now closer to China than to any other country because of their converging views on global governance and strategic issues bolstered by robust economic and military ties. For China, Pakistan has been its “all weather friend”, a “brother”. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on a recent visit to China described the Sino-Pakistan friendship as being “higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the deepest sea in the world, and sweeter than honey”. Thus, the current rapprochement between Moscow and Islamabad could also have to do with China's desire to bring its two closest partners together.

Given the economic problems in both Russia and Pakistan, both countries desire to benefit from Chinese investments. For instance, the pipeline between Karachi and Lahore might require investments from China. Russia also aims to benefit from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and is therefore willing to help in efforts to stabilise Pakistan.¹³

If indeed China has been prodding Russia and Pakistan to improve their bilateral relations, the question is: What is China's endgame? Does it hope to build a Russia-China-Pakistan bloc in Eurasia against the US and India?

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Despite its newfound closeness to Russia, Pakistan is unlikely to jeopardise its relationship with the US. After all, it continues to receive vast amounts of military aid and financial assistance from the US. Yet closer ties to Russia—with which the US has tensions—gives Islamabad some leverage over Washington. For Russia, concern about the spread of Islamic extremism from Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics, has drawn it closer to Pakistan. However, given its special relationship with India, it again seems unlikely that Russia will jeopardise its


relationship with India over Pakistan. While fears of a China-Russia-Pakistan axis and subsequent geostrategic encirclement of India may be overblown, India must remain alert to ward off any such possibility. It should do this by deepening and broadening its relationships with all three countries involved, as well as the US.

On the other hand, if Russia improves its leverage over Pakistan, it might be able to persuade Pakistan not to act against India and to play a constructive role in Afghanistan. This would be in India's interests, as it also wants a stable Afghanistan. However, if Russia does go ahead with deepening its military ties with Pakistan and gets more aggressive in selling defence equipment to Pakistan, this could prove detrimental to the growth of Indo-Russian ties.

There should not be any doubt about the leverage India has with Russia. Even if Pakistan turns out to be a big importer of Russian defence equipment, it can never be of the same size as the Indian market. Neither does it have the finances to buy massive quantities from Russia. Even though Russia has lost out on a few major contracts in recent times, it remains one of India's major arms suppliers—India still buys around \$2 billion worth of military equipment from Russia every year. The two countries also share deep historical ties and India was one of the few countries, which did not openly criticise Russia over its policies in Ukraine and Crimea. The two

countries are also partners in several multilateral forums like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), RIC (Russia, India and China), and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

India's Defence Minister Manohar Parikkar has expressed concern about media reports of the proposed sales of high-end military equipment to Pakistan and joint military exercises with it. However, it seems that while Russia understands India's concerns, it believes that having better ties with Pakistan will ultimately also benefit India. As the Indologist Professor Tatiana Shaumyan says, "Russia believes that expansion of Russian-Pakistani relations will contribute to the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan".¹⁴ It also seems unlikely that the Russia-Pakistan rapprochement can develop into a true strategic partnership. The historical memory of ties with India is too strong and Russia will also face a pushback from both the US and China in its attempts to woo Pakistan. However, it is expected that there will be a period of much more intensive and extensive interaction in various fields between the two countries.¹⁵

Given the geopolitical churn currently underway in global politics, the Russia-Pakistan rapprochement should not come as a surprise. It is only a reflection of rapidly changing, larger geostrategic realities to which India must quickly learn to adapt. 

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