



## BEYOND CONSTRAINING ALLIANCES: RE-THINKING PAKISTAN- RUSSIA TIES IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

*Ayesha Nasim*

*Senior Lecturer, University of Central Punjab, Lahore*

*Email: [ayesha.kamal@ucp.edu.pk](mailto:ayesha.kamal@ucp.edu.pk)*

### **Abstract**

*It is often argued that in the realm of international relations and foreign policy, there are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests. However, a state's interests do not exist in a vacuum and are constantly shaped and reshaped by changing dynamics in the international system. The world has shifted from unipolarity and bipolarity to multipolarity, and each country's interests should be reexamined in this changing system. Pakistan is no exception to this rule. While historically allied with US, it has often found itself at odds, especially in terms of foreign policy, with other countries who have hostile relations with the US. Russia is the prime example of one such country. Since the end of the Cold War, the dynamics of Pakistan-Russia relationship have been influenced by a multitude of factors, including global geopolitics, alliances with other major powers and regional security concerns. Now, with a need to establish more alliances, especially in Asia, both Russia and Pakistan need each other, and it serves their interests to develop better relations with each other. This research looks at the historical evolution of relations between the two countries to argue that they have been heavily influenced, and limited, by their respective alliances and changing dynamics in the international system and been characterized by periods of ups and downs. The article also explores avenues for cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, focusing on areas such as trade, defense, security, and energy. By assessing past challenges and opportunities, this article seeks to inform future policy directions to enhance bilateral cooperation and mitigate longstanding constraints in Pakistan-Russia relations.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan, Russia, Alliances, Bilateral cooperation, geopolitics, Cold War*

### **Introduction**

Since the end of the Cold War, Pakistan-Russia relations have improved considerably. However, the relations between the two countries have historically depended less on their own interests per se, and more so on changes in the geostrategic international environment, and the attitude and foreign policy preferences of their traditional allies, US and India respectively. As put by one analyst, "although the two countries never indulged in any bilateral dispute with each other, their alliances, geopolitical interests and respective worldviews have always remained poles apart" (Khan, 2018, p. 88). Since the start, Russia-Pakistan relations have been determined by Pakistan's relations with United States and India, *not* Pakistan and Russia (Trenin, 2011). Therefore, to understand Pakistan's relations with Russia, it is imperative to understand the history and evolution of Pakistan's relations with US and India, which in turn have been based on Pakistan's self-identity in the region post-independence and its quest for security. The partition produced two mismatched countries in terms of almost all indicators of power, such as military, economy, land size, population etc. making one of them the clear contender for regional hegemon. In this sense, Pakistan has always pursued foreign policy goals to somehow overcome this historical disadvantage, often by seeking military predominance above and beyond its means (Rais, 1991, p. 380). From very early on, this translated into an active involvement of US as the provider of



security in the form of military aid to Pakistan. In both the Cold War and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, “the dynamics of Washington’s rivalry with Moscow played a central role in the formation of security links with Pakistan” (Rais, 1991, p. 386). As Pakistan drifted closer to the US, India remained non-aligned during the Cold War – so while Pakistan became alienated from Moscow, the latter established a close relation with India. India’s war with China in 1962 only pushed Moscow closer to India, as it sought to balance against China which was posing a threat to Soviet Union’s leadership of the communist bloc. Pakistan and China’s relations began to develop at the same time “when the Soviet Union was subjecting Beijing to its own variety of containment” (Rais, 1991, p. 390). India’s defense needs were fulfilled by Moscow’s supply of weapons. Ultimately, the alliance between India and Soviet Union meant that the former had picked its ally in South Asia. The importance of India for Russia can also be judged from the fact that “Moscow has yet to figure out how to deal with Pakistan without spoiling the relationship with New Delhi” (Trenin, 2011). The fact that India and Pakistan share a historical rivalry, and US has been an ally of Pakistan since the start have simultaneously worked to keep Russia at arm-length. However, there are plenty of avenues for cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, especially defense, trade, economy and energy.

This article examines Pakistan-Russia relations from independence in 1957 until 2022 in light of the above dynamics. These are the questions that this research aims to address: How has the historical legacy of the Cold War influenced the trajectory of Pakistan-Russia relations? What role do geopolitical alignments and strategic alliances with other major powers play in shaping the dynamics of Pakistan-Russia relations? What are the prospects for enhancing bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Russia in areas such as trade, defense and energy? The article first discusses the history of their relations starting from the inception of Pakistan to explain how they have historically depended on events in the international environment and their respective alliances. As the periods of ups and downs in relations show, they have mostly been temporary in nature in response to deteriorating relations with US in the former and improvement in relations with US in the latter. The deterioration has most visibly been evident in cases of improving US-India ties as well. As noted by Clary (2022, p. 840), Pakistani leaders know that “well-publicized trips” to Russia can get them more assistance from US, and they have usually “been correct in that calculation.” As a result, the improvements in relations have only been short-term and limited. The case of Prime Minister Imran Khan’s tenure also shows the same trend; it is marked by improvement in relations, these have again been in response to troubled relations with US. The article contention is to argue that developing relations with Russia is in the interest of Pakistan, especially in the domains of economy, defense and energy, but real benefit will only come about when it is focused on the long-term instead of the periodic short-term collaboration. In the face of unpredictable and evolving relations with US, it is more important than ever for Pakistan reduce its dependence on US, and one of the ways to do so is to establish long-term and lasting ties with other powerful countries, like Russia, which can serve Pakistan’s interest.

### **History of Pakistan-Russia relations**

When one looks in-depth at Pakistan-Russia relations over time, two features stand out. Firstly, from the inception of Pakistan till the end of the Cold War, the relations remained rocky. This era is the reason why some scholars talk about a “historical baggage” (Chia & Zheng, 2021)



and “lingering mistrust” (Khan, 2021) in relations between them which they must overcome if any meaningful change is to be made. Secondly, after the Cold War, periods of marked improvements in relations have coincided with deterioration of relations with their key allies.

When Pakistan came into being in 1947, Russia was the one of the few countries which did not send a “congratulatory message to Pakistan” (Jinnah in Haqqani, 2013, p. 9). Perhaps this is why Pakistan established diplomatic relations with Russia much later in May 1948 and sent its first ambassador there in December 1949, while India announced diplomatic relations with Russia even before partition, and sent its first ambassador within the first few months (Clary, 2022, p. 841). Although, the first Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan stated in an interview to New York Times in 1947 that Pakistan will not ‘take sides’ in the Cold War and join any particular bloc, the need for US aid against the threat of India soon led it to become a key ally of the US (Dawn, 2010). While a few scholars blame Liaqat Ali Khan for Pakistan’s turn to US because he made the first visit to Washington instead of Moscow which had extended the invitation first (Malik, 1994; Achakzai, 2022; Owais, 2007), it was in fact the alliances that Pakistan developed with US that led to hostility in relations; SEATO in 1954 and CENTO in 1955, whose goal was the containment of communism (Naqvi & Masood, 2017). Pakistan was famously described as the ‘most allied ally’ of US in Asia at this time (Kux, 2001, p.68). The need to develop strong alliances was the need of the time, because after independence, Pakistan found itself at considerable disadvantage in comparison to the much larger and powerful India, which became a direct security threat. This narrative gained stronger foothold as both countries went to war soon after independence in 1948. At the same time, India’s relations with Soviet Union were good since the start. India developed close relations with Moscow mainly because of its hostile relations with China, and the need for weapons to strengthen its defense. In this situation, “where two superpowers had friendship with two belligerent neighbors”, Moscow’s relations with Pakistan inevitably suffered (Ahsan, 2004, p. 64). This was visible in Soviet Union’s backing of India over Kashmir issue in the Security Council, relating to which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (in Chaudhury, 2020) famously declared to India in 1955 that “We are so near that if you ever call us from the mountain-tops, we will appear at your side”. It also mediated between Pakistan and India in the 1965 war and helped broker the Tashkent Agreement. As Pakistan provided US access and bases in its territory in exchange of military aid, in 1960, the downing of a U-2 spy plane by Moscow which had taken off from Peshawar airbase led to retaliation from Moscow. In 1965, President Ayub Khan made an official trip to Moscow which was “the first direct personal contact in 18 years between the top leaders of Pakistan and Soviet Union” (Owais, 2007, p. 127). This trip came in the aftermath of increased US aid to India after its defeat in 1962 Indo-China War (Clary, 2022) as well as sentiments in Pakistan that US did not offer it support against India in the 1965 Indo-Pak war (Haqqani, 2013). Even though both Pakistan and India faced sanctions from US over the 1965 war, Pakistan, being the weaker and more dependent country, suffered more, and hence started pursuing other foreign policy options. The agreement on Cultural and Scientific Cooperation with Soviet Union was signed in 1965, and Moscow helped establish Pakistan Steel Mills in 1970. In addition, Pakistan also bought some tanks and weapons from Soviet Union (Clary, 2022). A number of trade cooperation agreements were also signed, but relations remained limited as can be seen from the fact that in terms of arms supply, only 5-10 million dollars’ worth was announced for Pakistan,



while 600-700 million dollars arms assistance was given to India and 260 million dollars to Afghanistan (Arif, 1984). In the 1970s, Pakistan played an important role in bringing about rapprochement between US and China, which was not looked upon favorably by Soviet Union (Khan, 2021). By this time, Indian had become a major importer of arms from Soviets, and the latter was aware of the implications of developing overt defense relations with Pakistan. In other words, they realized at the time that any “attempt to curry favor with Pakistan [will] lose them more goodwill in New Delhi than they were gaining in Islamabad” and suspended military supplies to Pakistan as a result (Central Intelligence Agency, 1972). It supported India during the 1971 war with Pakistan after signing the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with India, and providing military support, as well as vetoed resolutions in the Security Council which called for immediate ceasefire (Hanif, 2013). Pakistan turned to Soviet Union again in the aftermath of the 1971 War, mainly because US did not provide enough support to Pakistan during the war, including food aid as well as weapons (Clary, 2022). Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited the Soviet Union twice, in 1972 and 1974. However, any significant possibility of improvement in long term relations was put on halt by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. As a frontline ally of the US during this time, “Pakistan became a conduit for CIA’s overt and covert aid to mujahideen fighting against the Soviets” (Owais, 2007, p. 128). The defeat in Afghanistan was one of the main reasons for the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Owais, 2007). In Moscow’s eyes, Pakistan became “the enemy’s backer, resource base and sanctuary” (Trenin, 2011).

For a long time after the emergence of Russia in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the relations between Pakistan and Russia saw only periodic improvements. For instance, Russian Vice-President Alexander Rutskoi visited Pakistan in 1992, followed by Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev in 1993 and First Deputy Foreign Minister Adamishin in May 1994. From Pakistan’s side, Foreign Secretary Akram Zaki visited Russia in 1992 and Foreign Minister Sardar Aseff Ali in 1994 and Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif in 1999 (Shah, 2001). During most of these visits, preliminary talks were held about possible avenues of cooperation in technology, diplomacy and defense and some agreements were signed such as the creation of an intergovernmental commission for trade and economy (Owais, 2007). US sanctions on Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment disillusioned Pakistan at this time, as “Pakistan felt that US had abandoned it as an ally after using Pakistan for US Cold War objectives” (Khan, 2021). However, developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s support for the government of Taliban once again limited the possibility of developing relations further, as Russia considered religious extremism and Taliban regime in Afghanistan as detrimental to its own security (Owais, 2007).

Before the 9/11 attacks on US, Pakistan and Russia achieved a landmark development in 2001 when they reached an agreement under which Russia agreed to sell 16 MI-17 military helicopters to Pakistan. Even though Pakistan became an ally of US in its War on Terror, the threat by Bush administration to bomb Pakistan back into the stone age if it did not join the US side “became a stimulus for Pakistan to diversify its foreign policy” (Naqvi and Masood, 2017; The Guardian, 2006). At the same time, with President Putin in power in Russia, China-Russia ties improved and Pakistan could also play an important role in solidifying these ties because of its close relations with China (Clary, 2022). In 2002, the Pakistan-Russia Business Forum was created, followed by Pakistan-Russia Business Council to boost investment and economic



cooperation. President Musharraf visited Russia in 2003, and a number of agreements were signed to promote cultural, trade and diplomatic ties between the two countries. In 2005, US and India moved closer to a nuclear cooperation deal and later in 2008, US allowed exemption to India to carry out civil nuclear trade and also endorsed its membership to Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) while denying Pakistan the same. “Feeling betrayed and alienated by the US legislation and its fallout,” Pakistan again reached out to Russia (Khan, 2021). In 2005 and 2006, various meetings were held at different levels between officials from both countries during summits, UN General Assembly sessions and visits of delegations. For instance, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit in November 2006 was considered a landmark visit due to its focus on renewing cooperation in communications, energy, railways, information technology, counterterrorism and defense and an agreement was reached to launch the Pakistan-Russia Joint Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic and Scientific Cooperation (Owais, 2007). When Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov visited Pakistan in 2007, agreements were signed for cooperation in the areas of arts, culture and drug trafficking, as well as upgradation of Pakistan Railways (Owais, 2007). In 2011, President Vladimir Putin supported Pakistan’s application for membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), hurling in a new era of Pakistan-Russia relations. The SCO was established in 1996 originally as Shanghai Five, comprised of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with Uzbekistan joining in 2001. This organization was created to collectively address the problems of extremism and terrorism. Later on, it expanded to include cooperation on “drugs, weapon smuggling, organized crime, cyberterrorism, terrorist financial flows, transportation” etc. (Khan, 2021). India and Pakistan joined SCO as observer states in 2005 and became full members in 2017. Many scholars are of the view that this reflected a “major change in Russia’s policies towards Pakistan, realizing the latter’s importance in South Asia as a partner” (Naqvi and Masood, 2017). Putin also offered Russian assistance in the expansion of Pakistan Steel Mills and Guddu and Muzaffargarh power plants.

### **Constraining Role of Alliances**

It is apparent from the above discussion that the respective alliances of Pakistan and Russia have played a constraining role on the development of their relations. The role of US in limiting Pakistan-Russia relations has already been discussed in the previous section, especially during the Cold War era and when Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Similar dynamics are visible in the case of Russia-India ties as well. For instance, Russia sought to develop defense relations with Pakistan at a time when US-India defence cooperation was growing (Clary, 2022). In fact, Russia has openly made statements that show that its preference in terms of building sustainable and long-lasting relations lies with India, not Pakistan. For instance, in 2012, Russian deputy Prime Minister told Indian reporters that “we are always cooperating with India... we never created trouble for India. If someone says otherwise, spit in his face”, followed by a direct reference to Pakistan saying, “we don’t do military business with your enemies, we don’t transfer arms to them” (Dikshit, 2012). The 2013 document on Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by Putin described Russia’s intention to keep fostering a “privileged strategic partnership” with India, while Pakistan was not even mentioned (Moskalenko & Topychkanov, 2014).



The development of India and US bilateral relations in recent years, especially after signing a nuclear deal, is an important factor that explains the tilt of Russia towards Pakistan (George, 2016). One of the major reasons for closer relations from the side of US has been the rising power of China, and the US need to counter it. In the South Asian region, India has conflicts with China, which makes India an attractive ally for US. The rising defense needs of India, especially to counter the Chinese armed forces have also played an important role in shifting this equation. So much so, that US displaced Russia as the biggest arms supplier of India in 2013, rising from importing \$237 million in military equipment in 2009 to \$1.9 billion in 2013 (Plimmer & Mallet, 2014). Russia's role in Asia has remained limited over time, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, except for its close diplomatic and defense ties with India. A major factor has been the active US involvement in the region as well as its own crumbling economy after the end of the Cold War (Raza, 2017). However, when India has shown keenness in developing relations with US, Russia has also responded by enhancing cooperation with Pakistan. For instance, Russia lifted the arms embargo on Pakistan in 2014 and talks were held on supplying Pakistan with MI-35 helicopters, four of which were provided in 2017 (Gady, 2017). Various news outlets linked this development with India's decision to buy arms from other countries like US, United Kingdom and Israel, though historically Russia had been its biggest arms supplier (Dawn, 2014), as well as Russia's growing strategic interests in South Asia "driven by security concerns shared with Pakistan" after US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Bodner, 2014). This was also reflected in the statement of the head of a Russian think-tank, saying "I do not think that India will have any objections. After all, India and Pakistan both buy weapons from the US, and this has not bothered them" (The Moscow Times, 2014). Similarly, according to a Russian diplomat, "India could have been more loyal to Russia in the field of military and technical cooperation and saved it from the disagreeable situation in which Moscow on its own had to search for markets to sell military equipment meant for Delhi (Dikshit, 2012). This sentiment was also shared by Ruslan Pukhov (in Strokan, 2012), Director of a Russian think tank, "Delhi's attempts to diversify its supplies of new weapons increasingly from Western countries are making Russia flinch" and in response, Russia "can also diversify its military-technical ties by means of a rapprochement with Pakistan." However, they have periodically stressed the short term nature of this relationship. As put by Bodner (2014), "our cooperation with Pakistan should be very specific and limited, while our cooperation with India should be much more strategic." Strokan (2012) also pointed out that defense cooperation with Pakistan is likely to remain limited so that "Russia is unlikely to sell Islamabad an air defense system or fighter aircraft" but it could supply "Mi-17 helicopters in addition to combat training and the exchange of military experts." India has also let its disapproval of Russian's relations with Pakistan be known openly. For instance, after the first Pakistan-Russia joint military exercise was held, the Indian envoy to Russia, Pankaj Saran (in Jacob, 2016), told a Russian news agency that, "military cooperation with Pakistan which is a state that sponsors and practices terrorism as a matter of state policy is a wrong approach, and it will only create further problems." According to Clary (2022, p. 862), India's antagonism has been the main reason that these military cooperation and joint exercises have been limited and 'non-provocative' in scope, "focusing on missions such as counterterrorism or counter-narcotics that are comparatively benign."



During Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure, reproachment with Russia again happened in the backdrop of overcoming a "structural imbalance" to reduce dependence on the US and "gain greater freedom of maneuver on the world stage" (Clary, 2022, p. 841). After President Joe Biden took office in 2021, he did not have a telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Imran Khan, and this was seen very negatively by the Pakistani government. The National Security Advisor, Moeed Yusuf, famously commented in August 2021 that, "If a phone call is a concession, if a security relationship is a concession, Pakistan has options" (The Economic Times, 2021)." Again, the pursuit of these options led Pakistan to Russia, and at the end of the same month, Pakistani Prime Minister and Russia's President had a telephonic conversation, eventually followed by the former's visit to Russia in February 2022 (Khan, 2021). The timing of this visit was ill-conceived however, as it came on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, giving Imran Khan "a high-profile cameo appearance in the first great power war in Europe in more than two decades" (Clary, 2022, p. 840). The energy minister at the time, Hammad Azhar, elaborated on the purpose of this visit in an interview to The Third Pole (Ebrahim, 2022). One of these was to resume the Pakistan Stream gas pipeline project with the help of Russian financing. Amidst the backdrop of Germany halting the certification of Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Russia looking for more energy clients, it worked in the interest of both Russia and Pakistan to resume this project (Mikovic, 2021). Another objective was to further develop cooperation on trade and economic initiatives between the two countries (Humayun, 2022). Gas and wheat imports were also on the agenda during this visit (Gul, 2022). US disapproval of the visit was also evident from the fact that its regulatory authorities fined Pakistan's National Bank's New York branch an amount of Rs. 9.69 billion on charges of non-compliance and anti-money laundering soon after the visit (Business Standard, 2024).

### **Avenues for Cooperation between Pakistan and Russia**

#### **1. Trade and Economic Ties**

The amount of bilateral trade between Russia and Pakistan has always been limited. While Russia has \$15 billion trade with China, \$5 billion with Iran and \$3 billion with India, trade volume with Pakistan increased gradually from 1998 (\$50 million) to 2006 (\$520 million) (Owais, 2007). Russia mainly exports chemical products, paper, metal, fertilizers and timber to Pakistan, while Pakistan exports garments, food items and leather products to Russia. Both Russia and Pakistan have the potential to gain from increasing their bilateral trade, and developing economic relations can be the first step towards more concrete relations in the future. They are both a part of regional forums like OECD and SCO, and these can serve as conduits for enhancing bilateral trade. In 2012, Pakistan's exports to Russia were \$210 million, only 0.04% of the total Russian trade volume and its imports from Russia were \$332 million, 0.07% of the total Russian trade volume (Hussain and Fatima, 2013). Unsettled financial disputes after the Soviet era were a major factor that limited economic relations between the two countries. As described by Alexey Dedov (2015), Russia faced difficulties in implementing the project of reconstruction of Pakistan Steel Mills in 2013, and in overall investing in the country, because its "legislation does not allow to provide government loans to a foreign country which has unsettled financial disputes with Russia." Under Prime Minister Imran Khan's rule, these trade disputes were settled with the agreement that "Pakistani government will return \$93.5 million to Russia within 90 days of the signing" and "clear pending exporters' claims to the tune of \$23.8 million as per the settlement agreements of 2016 and 2017"



which were reached, but never implemented (Bhutta, 2019). Soon after this, Denis Manturov, Russian Minister of Industry and Trade, led a 64-member business delegation on an official four-day visit to Islamabad to explore various areas of economic cooperation and investment with Pakistani counterparts.” As a result of these and other policies, Pakistan’s total trade with Russia increased by 108% from 2011 to 2020 (The Pakistan Business Council, 2022), although almost all of this increase has come from rise in imports (270% during the same time). A study by the Pakistan Business Council in 2021-2022 found that there is considerable potential in Pakistan-Russia trade which can be utilized by Pakistan. For instance, the study found that in 2020, Russia was 25<sup>th</sup> in rank of countries that Pakistan exports textile too, comprising only 0.5% of total textile exports. Pakistan exports a significant number of meat and seafood items, but it has never exported these products to Russia in the last ten years. Similarly, export potential of \$2.8 billion in Russia was identified on this report comprising “textiles (\$1.6 billion), agricultural products (\$330 million), surgical items (\$356 million), chemical and allied products (\$178 million), footwear (\$82 million) and plastic products (\$62 million).” The study recommended that to maximize this potential, Pakistan should sign Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union that Russia is a member of, develop road transport initiatives with Russia to increase export of fruits and vegetables, allow direct flights between the two countries, reduce tariffs on trade and establish offices of Pakistani companies in Russia because Russian laws require some products to be registered in Russia before they can be imported. Even in 2020, Pakistan was the “63<sup>rd</sup> largest market for Russian exports, and Russia was the “27<sup>th</sup> largest market for Pakistani goods”, and most of the Pakistan’s exports were textiles and citrus, while the imports consisted of wheat and legumes, which “evoke the grand strategic potential of the relationship” (Clary, 2022).

## **2. Defense and Security Ties**

The Russian Defense Minister’s visit to Pakistan in 2014 led to the signing of a military cooperation pact, emphasizing joint naval exercises, “military officer exchanges, arms sales and counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation” (Bodner, 2014). In 2016, first joint military exercises were conducted between the two countries (Dawn, 2016) followed by Aman naval exercise in 2017 in which Russia participated for the first time (Dawn, 2018). From 2018 onwards, during Prime Minister Imran Khan’s tenure, naval cooperation was enhanced as representatives from both countries agreed to “step up efforts to effectively confront the transnational challenges and threats in the maritime domain.” Aman exercises were regularly held between the two countries in 2019 and 2021 (Dawn, 2019; Naval Technology, 2021). Bilateral naval exercises, Arabian Monsoon, were conducted in 2018 and 2021 (The News, 2021). Joint military exercises Druzhba have also been regularly held since 2016 (The Express Tribune, 2021).

In 2018, as the US announced a cut in the military training program for Pakistani officers over differences on Afghanistan (Iqbal, 2018), Pakistan for the first time signed a security training agreement with Russia (Gull, 2018). Under this agreement, Russia agreed to provide military training of Pakistani army officers, leading some analysts to believe that the two countries were becoming ‘best friends’ (Peck, 2018). The frequency of these military engagements between the two countries “is reflective of the growing interests in defense and security domains” (Naqvi and Masood, 2017). In September 2018, the Pakistan-Russia Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) was established, which has been called “the highest forum of defense collaboration



between the two countries” (Siddiq, 2021). It has held regular meetings ever since on areas of interest and collaboration such as “military training, joint exercises, intelligence cooperation, defense industrial cooperation, the evolving situation in Afghanistan and regional stability” (ibid.). In April 2021, Russia’s foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov visited Pakistan which was significant for various reasons. The Russian minister announced plans of supplying LNG to Pakistan, military equipment and holding joint military drills (Siddiqui, 2012). In December 2021, National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf visited Russia and met his counterpart Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev to discuss issues related to cybersecurity, counterterrorism, defense and economy (Syed, 2021). The ‘Russia-Pakistan Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism and Other Challenges to International Security’ established in 2002 was revived in 2014, and it has been having regular meetings ever since (Kapoor, 2019).

However, there is still considerable potential to develop cooperation further. If one compares the situation with India, “in 2018 alone, India decided to sign the contract for supply for S400 missile defence system worth \$5.2 billion, four frigates worth \$950 million followed the next year by a \$3 billion deal for a nuclear submarine to replace INS Chakra, approval for purchase of 464 T-90 tanks for \$2 billion and the launch of the joint project to manufacture AK-203/103 rifles” (Kapoor, 2019). Pakistan has historically depended on US for its military needs. Developing relations with Russia can help Pakistan overcome this dependence, while fulfilling its defense and security needs. The potential to develop future military and defense cooperation is also there because of Afghanistan as the security of its southern borders is linked to the situation in Afghanistan. Since Pakistan is an important neighbor, “if Russia continues to snub Pakistan in favor of India, it would ultimately run contrary to the interests of Russia’s security” (Strokan, 2012).

### 3. Energy and investment ties

Many scholars and analysts recognize the potential of energy imports and infrastructure support from Russia. For instance, Owais (2007) has discussed the various opportunities that exist in the field of fuel and energy in which Russia has dominance. Khan (2019) discussed that Russian investments and transnational energy cooperation can help Pakistan in meeting its energy needs and economic development. Pakistan and Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005 to promote cooperation in “construction and maintenance of gas pipelines, underground storage facilities, exploration of natural gas fields, and substitution of diesel fuel by compressed gas used by motor and rail transport” (Owais, 2007, p. 132). Pakistan has growing energy requirements, and Russia has expertise in this domain. Developing relations in this field by taking practical steps, such as offering Russia incentives would help the country. In 2015, the two countries signed a \$2 billion deal for the construction of North-South Gas Pipeline Project from Lahore to Karachi (Naqvi and Masood, 2017; Dawn, 2015). According to the Russian Special Presidential Envoy on Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov (in The News, 2023), “As soon as the agreement was signed, it immediately fell under US sanctions, which has made work difficult. This is what you call unfair competition and shows the manner of the behavior of the Americans who inexcusably obstruct the deal.”

Pakistan is the fourth largest LNG exporter in the world, yet before 2020, it did not import Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Russia even though it offered to sell LNG at much lower prices



than were being paid by Pakistan to other countries such as USA, Qatar and Egypt (Pakistan Business Council, 2022). During Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Russia, pipelines were high on the agenda. The previously discussed but immaterialized gas pipeline from Kazakhstan project with Russia could be utilized by Pakistan to provide about 14-15 billion cubic feet of gas which would be "enough to meet the country's gas demand" (Press Trust of India, 2022). Also on agenda was the "push for the construction of long-delayed, multi-billion-dollar" Pakistan Stream gas pipeline, formerly called the North-South Pipeline, which has been facing delays due to US sanctions (Peshimam, 2022). It was supposed to be completed by 2018 according to the initial agreement (Dawn, 2015). Another gas pipeline project, Iran-Pakistan (IP), also suffered the same fate earlier due to US and European Union sanctions (Bhutta, 2016). As the country's own reserves are "fast depleting", these pipelines are of vital importance to Pakistan (Bhutta, 2022). However, the talks remained inconclusive because of the "issue of Pakistan defaulting on its sovereign guarantees extended to Russian lenders" (Mustafa, 2022). In the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion, the pipeline faces further delays because of new and greater sanctions on Russia and other considerations (Isaad and Nicholas, 2022). Similarly, with regards to investment, projects have been announced and discussed, but material output has been missing. Pakistan-Russia power project in Jamshoro was approved in 2017 (Geo News, 2017). During Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure, various projects were announced. For instance, in 2021, it was announced that Russia will provide funds for the modernization of Pakistan Steel Mills, which was established with the help of Soviet funding in the first place. It was also discussed that a 50MW power waste-to-energy plan would be established in Dhabeji, along with other projects (The News, 2021). After Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure came to an end, however, it was announced that Chinese, not Russian, firms have been finalized for reviving the non-functional Steel Mills. It was hinted that political pressure from US was the reason behind this move (Khan, 2022). Later, in October 2023, it was announced that "three out of four Chinese firms" had decided to "exit the race" and hence it was left to the "industries ministry to 'revive' it" (Dawn, 2023).

Russia is the biggest exporter of natural gas in the world and the second largest exporter of oil, while Pakistan suffers energy shortage and is hugely dependent on energy imports from other countries. In 2021, it was estimated that "Pakistan has a gas shortfall of 1.5 billion cubic feet per day, which would double by 2025" (Katona, 2021). Because of this, gas outages have become common in the country, which are disrupting the supply to homes and businesses and having a negative effect on the economy. To meet this shortfall, Pakistan started importing LNG in 2015, and in six years, became the world's ninth largest LNG importer (Chia and Haiqi, 2021). At the same time, Russia's oil and gas exports to Europe have been decreasing, because of conscious efforts by Europe to reduce dependence on Russia and find alternative sources, especially in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In this situation, both countries can benefit considerably from enhanced cooperation. As a result of an agreement signed between Russia and Pakistan during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Russia in 2022, Pakistan received the first shipment of liquefied gas (LPG) from Russia in 2023 (Reuters, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

Historically, Pakistan and Russia relations have been constrained because they found themselves at odds and opposition with each other, first because of the Cold War dynamics and



later when Taliban took over control in Afghanistan. It is a well-known fact that both Russia and Pakistan have interest in stability in Afghanistan to overcome the problem of terrorism and extremism. Instability in Afghanistan can also “complicate all proposals that depend on ground corridors from Russia through Central Asia into Pakistan” (Clary, 2022). It also has the impact of undermining the security of Russia because of the “threat of terrorism and drugs flowing into its borders via Central Asia” (Kapoor, 2019). As Russia’s approach towards the Taliban became more relaxed and aligned, especially after Taliban’s own feud with the Islamic State and the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK), Russia has been more supportive of Pakistan’s efforts to hold talks with the Taliban (Clary, 2022). Russia-Pakistan relations have also been derivative of the former’s relationship with India and the latter’s with US. In recent years, stability in Afghanistan, development in US-India relations and the crisis and eventual war in Ukraine have provided the context in which both Pakistan and Russia can achieve their individual goals and advance their interests through increased collaboration. With India gaining more power, its preferences and priorities have been changing both at the regional as well as the global level. The US-India partnership has also altered the balance of power in the region of South Asia, and for Pakistan at least, this development necessitates the exploration of Russia-Pakistan-China triad. In recent years, uncertainty in Europe has also made it imperative for Russia to develop relations with other countries. Now, after the invasion of Ukraine, this need is more than ever. High level engagements between officials from the two countries have been happening at a steady speed since the 2010s, as reflected in development in relations in economic, security and energy realms which indicates that there is readiness from both countries regarding cooperation. This should now be translated into more tangible outcomes for their mutual benefit.

Pakistan and Russia have a lot to gain from developing bilateral relations. While their relations have undergone a steady improvement over time, marked by periods of ups and downs, they have yet to realize their full potential. It has been the contention of this paper to argue that these relations have been limited due to global dynamics and events, especially when seen in the context of their historical alliances. Pakistan has been dependent on US for military and economic aid since its inception, and no doubt, US continues to be an important partner for Pakistan. After all, it is ‘Pakistan’s largest export market’, ‘leading potential investor in regional connectivity projects’, ‘its regional security collaborator’ etc. (Humayun, 2022). However, it is also true that in various points in history, its dependency on US has proven to be a hindrance in developing relations with Russia. Russia has also been more inclined towards developing and maintaining its relations with India. However, despite these historical complexities and alignments shaping the nature of relations between Russia and Pakistan, there are also opportunities for enhanced bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade, defense and energy investment, driven by shared interests and evolving regional dynamics. It is in interest of both Pakistan and Russia countries to develop more bilateral and multilateral engagement and carry out sustained, long-term and reciprocal efforts in order to enhance their ties.



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