

THE EVOLVING NATURE OF PAKISTAN-RUSSIA STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

*Prof. Dr Muhammad Khan**

Abstract

In the 21st century, Pakistan and Russia have witnessed a steady evolution in their bilateral relationship, transitioning from limited trade ties to a broader strategic partnership. While economic interactions have remained consistent, significant progress has been made in political and military cooperation, marked by a newfound warmth and mutual interest. Successive Pakistani governments, both military and civilian, have consistently pursued this relationship with strategic intent, reflecting a bipartisan consensus among the country's political and military leadership. This evolving partnership signifies a broader realignment in global geopolitics, where Russia, in concert with China, seeks to challenge the unipolar world order, with Pakistan emerging as a potential strategic linchpin. Shared concerns over regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan and Central Asia, have further aligned the interests of both states. Analysts view that the former Cold War adversaries now share more common ground than either does with the United States. Moreover, Pakistan's geographic positioning presents opportunities for it to serve as a future energy corridor linking Central Asia and Russia with South Asia and China. As both countries navigate emerging regional and global challenges, their converging interests offer a foundation for a durable and forward-looking strategic partnership.

Keywords: Pakistan, Russia, Strategic Relationship, South Asia, Central Asia, China, United States and Afghanistan.

Introduction

Pakistan's geopolitics has long attracted significant interest from both regional and global powers. Strategically located at the crossroads¹ of Asia's key sub-regions, situated at the entrance to South Asia, adjacent to Central Asia,

*Professor Dr. Muhammad Khan is Chairman at the Department of Politics and International Relations in International Islamic University (IIUI), Islamabad. The authors' email address is drmkedu@gmail.com.

closely connected with West Asia (the Middle East), and acting as a gateway to East Asia (China), Pakistan occupies a pivotal position. This strategic location led the renowned British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder to describe the region as the “geographical pivot of history.”²

Pakistan’s geopolitical importance is further amplified by its national power—a state’s capacity to pursue national interests and strategic objectives both domestically and internationally. National power³ is typically assessed through tangible and intangible elements: geography, population, natural resources, economic potential, political stability, military capability, ideology, leadership, and national morale. Pakistan possesses all these key components. Over the past 77 years, the country has undergone a significant transformation, characterised by a resilient population, a professional military, a strong ideological foundation, and an increasing emphasis on high-tech development. However, governance challenges remain and require attention to fully harness the country’s potential.

Despite geographical proximity, the Soviet Union and Pakistan remained diplomatically distant during the Cold War era. Pakistan established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union on May 1, 1948, and its first ambassador, Mr Shuaib Qureshi, arrived in Moscow in 1949⁴. By then, India had already initiated diplomatic ties with Moscow on April 3, 1947, even before its formal independence. The early Indian diplomacy spearheaded by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit⁵, sister of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the first Indian ambassador to the USSR, strengthened Indo-Soviet ties, inadvertently creating a void in Moscow-Islamabad relations.

This initial diplomatic delay between Pakistan and the Soviet Union allowed rival powers to exploit misperceptions on both sides. Unfortunately, despite the invitation, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan could not visit Moscow. The myth persists that this visit was proposed, initiated, and even accepted, but did not materialise. Thereafter, the distance widened in the 1950s when Pakistan aligned itself with the US-led Western bloc by joining security alliances such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO)⁶. These decisions, motivated by security concerns from India⁷ and Afghanistan, were not aimed directly at the USSR but were instead strategic measures for Pakistan’s self-defence. Nevertheless, Moscow came to view Pakistan as a Western proxy, a perception worsened by incidents such as the U-2

spy plane incident of May 1, 1960, which involved an American aircraft using Pakistani airspace.

The 1980s further strained bilateral ties as Pakistan supported the US-backed Mujahedin during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This period marked a high point of hostility between Islamabad and Moscow. Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989⁸, the abrupt departure of the US left Pakistan grappling with the remnants of the conflict, namely, heavily armed jihadist groups. Many of these later evolved into terrorist organisations, creating security challenges for Pakistan that persist even today, especially along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

Efforts to mend ties began in the 1990s after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Several geopolitical shifts occurred during this time: the US distanced itself from Pakistan, began a strategic alignment with India, and tensions between the US and China started to surface. India, while maintaining its historical ties with Russia, moved closer to the US to gain strategic and economic advantages in the unipolar world order. Meanwhile, Pakistan, maintaining close relations with China, was seen by Washington as less favourable than New Delhi in its broader Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at counterbalancing China.

Despite historical mistrust, signs of warming emerged between Pakistan and Russia in the mid-1990s. In 1996, Russia signed a deal to provide Pakistan with Mi-17 multipurpose helicopters, delivered in phases until 2004; a positive development, though both sides remained cautious. India's continued close ties with Russia posed an obstacle to deeper Pakistan-Russia engagement. Additionally, Pakistan's recognition of the Taliban regime in 1996 complicated matters, further delaying meaningful bilateral progress until Pakistan severed ties with the Taliban after 2001.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan urged the Taliban to hand over Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Taliban leader Mullah Omar offered to extradite him to a third country if the US presented evidence of his involvement. However, President George W. Bush rejected the offer and proceeded with military intervention in Afghanistan. Pakistan distanced itself from the Taliban regime following Mullah Omar's refusal to cooperate with a senior Pakistani envoy seeking a peaceful resolution. This move facilitated a thaw in Pakistan-Russia

relations. Notably, while Russia once opposed the Taliban, it now maintains cordial ties with the current interim Taliban government in Afghanistan.

On July 3, 2025, Moscow officially recognised the Taliban government of Afghanistan⁹. Afghan Foreign Minister Mr Amir Khan Muttaqi described the development as marking "a new phase of positive relations, mutual respect, and constructive engagement"¹⁰. He expressed hope that other countries would follow Russia's lead in recognising the Taliban government. The Russian Foreign Ministry characterised the decision as a responsible step with the potential to enhance "commercial and economic cooperation" in key sectors such as energy, transportation, agriculture, and infrastructure. Additionally, both nations emphasised that this recognition could pave the way for joint efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking.

In the evolving global landscape, Pakistan and Russia have developed a cordial and increasingly cooperative relationship on both political and economic fronts. There is a shared aspiration between Islamabad and Moscow to collaborate on regional peace, stability, and economic development through joint mechanisms. One of the most significant milestones in recent years was Russia's support for Pakistan's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017¹¹. This marked a turning point, reflecting Moscow's recognition of Pakistan as a pivotal player in the region. More recently, in 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the 24th SCO Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. The meeting was described as constructive and forward-looking, with both leaders expressing a desire to expand cooperation in political, economic, and military spheres. They agreed to fully utilise the SCO platform to deepen their strategic and political ties.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries, which date back to May 1, 1948, have gained renewed warmth since the early 2000s. General Pervez Musharraf's landmark visit to Moscow in 2003¹² was a pivotal moment, followed by high-level exchanges, including President Asif Ali Zardari in 2011 and Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Russia in February 2022. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Russia as a State guest in April 1999, the first trip to Moscow by any head of government in 25 years. These interactions have laid the groundwork for sustained bilateral engagement.

Economically, Pakistan and Russia have expressed a mutual interest in enhancing trade and investment. Key areas of cooperation include energy, infrastructure, and agriculture. Barter trade has emerged as a promising avenue, particularly due to regional proximity and logistical linkages via Central Asia. This model of trade could be expanded to include other regional actors in the future. Russia, a global energy powerhouse, is seen as a vital partner in addressing Pakistan's energy needs. Several important agreements have been signed in this regard that includes: a) 2015: Intergovernmental agreement for the construction of the North-South Gas Pipeline from Karachi to Lahore¹³, b) 2017: Agreement on cooperation in the liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector, c) 2018: Agreement for a feasibility study on an offshore gas pipeline, d) 2019: MoU between Pakistan's Inter State Gas Company and Russia's Gazprom for gas supply feasibility studies and e) 2022: Agreements for the supply of discounted crude oil. These developments point toward growing economic interdependence, particularly in the energy sector. Pakistani exports to Russia have also seen consistent growth, increasing from \$13.2 million in 1996 to \$75.16 million in 2024 and are estimated to reach \$88.3 million¹⁴.

The historical trajectory of Pakistan-Russia (and earlier Soviet Union) relations is marked by both cooperation and strains. In 1958, the Soviet Union offered technical assistance to Pakistan, followed by President Ayub Khan's historic visit to Moscow in 1965. This visit helped repair earlier misunderstandings and paved the way for agreements on trade and cultural exchange. The Soviet mediation of the Tashkent Declaration in 1966¹⁵ further highlighted Russia's role in South Asian diplomacy. During the 1970s, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's two visits to Moscow signalled a shift in Pakistan's foreign policy, fostering improved ties. One of the most tangible outcomes of this period was the establishment of the Pakistan Steel Mills, built with Soviet assistance—a landmark project for the country's industrial development. However, relations soured in the 1980s due to Cold War dynamics, particularly during the Soviet-Afghan War. U.S. influence over Pakistan at the time led to deep mistrust between Moscow and Islamabad. Yet, with the end of the Cold War, both countries have moved beyond these past grievances.

Strategic relationships are typically defined as formal, long-term partnerships between states, grounded in shared interests and mutual benefits. These relationships often encompass a wide range of areas, including defence cooperation, economic collaboration, technological advancements, and sustained

diplomatic engagement. Their foundation lies in converging goals and strategic objectives that align the interests of the involved nations. The potential for a strategic partnership between Pakistan and Russia has increasingly become a subject of discussion, particularly in Western capitals and India. As Daniel Markey of Johns Hopkins University observes, “The point is that Russia and Pakistan probably have more in common with respect to the war in Afghanistan than the United States has with either, and this is a real turnaround from prior history.”¹⁶ His observation reflects a significant shift in geopolitical dynamics.

Afghanistan remains a persistent source of geopolitical, geo-economic, and security challenges for regional powers, including Russia and Pakistan. The domestic instability in Afghanistan often produces ripple effects across the region and beyond. Historically, Afghanistan has served as a battleground for external powers seeking to advance their strategic interests. Given this backdrop, it is pragmatic for both Pakistan and Russia to pursue a joint strategy for regional security, strategic stability, and economic integration.

To effectively address these shared challenges, a strategic relationship is essential, not only bilaterally between Pakistan and Russia, but also at a trilateral level including China. Pakistan and China already enjoy a strong, multifaceted partnership, including a strategic dimension. Pakistan and Russia should foster a trust-based, enduring, and independent relationship—one that does not come at the expense of other global actors but is rooted in mutual respect and shared national interests.

There has been scepticism regarding the evolution of Pak-Russia relations into a full-fledged strategic partnership, especially given the historically inconsistent and fragile nature of their bilateral ties. However, in international relations, there are neither permanent friends nor permanent foes. The Pakistan-U.S. relationship itself has experienced significant fluctuations, from Cold War alliances to cooperation during the War on Terror, and yet has remained resilient through various phases.

In contrast, the Pakistan-Russia relationship has long been misunderstood and shaped by Cold War-era misperceptions. The current global and regional security environment, however, demands a reassessment. Geographic proximity, evolving strategic interests, and shifting global alliances all point to the need for enhanced cooperation between Islamabad and Moscow. With realistic

expectations and policymaker commitment, a robust strategic relationship is not only possible but necessary.

Although the groundwork for improved bilateral relations was laid in the mid-1990s, it was not until 2001 that significant progress was made. That year, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov's¹⁷ official visit to Islamabad marked the formal beginning of strategic-level engagement between the two countries. His visit identified key areas for cooperation, including strategic cooperation, economic collaborations, and political understanding, while also opening dialogue on cultural exchanges, technological collaboration, and development partnerships.

Following the events of 9/11, regional peace and security in South and Central Asia became a shared priority for both Pakistan and Russia. The evolving security environment has created a common ground that can serve as the basis for a deeper and more comprehensive strategic relationship.

Over the past decade, Pakistan and Russia have made steady progress in strengthening their defence cooperation. This evolving relationship is marked by a series of high-level military engagements, joint exercises, and formal agreements that reflect a shared desire to deepen bilateral military ties. The most recent milestone in this journey was the 5th session of the Pakistan-Russia Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC), held in Pakistan in October 2024¹⁸. The meeting was co-chaired by Lieutenant General Muhammad Ali (Retired), Defence Secretary of Pakistan, and Colonel General Alexander V. Fomin, Russian Deputy Defence Minister. Both sides reviewed the progress made in military collaboration and explored avenues for expanding cooperation in key areas such as military training, personnel exchanges, and defence technology.

According to the Ministry of Defence of Pakistan, the talks were “productive,” with both delegations expressing satisfaction over the trajectory of their strategic and defence cooperation. The Russian Defence Ministry echoed similar sentiments, describing the meeting as constructive and forward-looking. Notably, the two countries agreed on an Interdepartmental Cooperation Plan for 2025, laying the groundwork for continued defence collaboration. The foundation for this growing relationship was laid earlier, notably in August 2018, when Pakistan and Russia signed a security training agreement under the JMCC framework. The inaugural JMCC meeting was held on August 7–8, 2018, in

Islamabad and attended by Pakistan's then Defence Secretary Zamir ul Hassan Shah and Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin of Russia. During this meeting, the two sides signed a "Contract on Admission of Service Members of Pakistan in the RF [Russian Federation's] Training Institutes"¹⁹, paving the way for Pakistani military personnel to receive training in Russian military academies.

This agreement emerged in the backdrop of a significant policy shift by the United States, which had curtailed military training for Pakistani officers under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Initiated in the 1950s, the IMET program facilitated training exchanges between mid-career and senior military officers of both countries. However, during the first term of the Trump administration, the U.S. suspended these training opportunities; a move criticised by analysts and even by officials within the Pentagon. Dan Feldman, a former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, termed the Trump administration's decision "short-sighted and myopic." Many within the Pentagon feared this would push Pakistan closer to Russia, a scenario that eventually unfolded as Pakistan accepted Moscow's offer for military training and deeper defence engagement. In his second presidential term, Trump has an optimistic approach towards Pakistan, as reflected in the post-India-Pakistan army conflict, where it later emerged as a victorious state. Later, President Trump lauded Pakistan, appreciated its military and military leadership after meeting Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, Chief of Army Staff of the Pakistan Army²⁰. It is to be noted that, during this unusual meeting, President Trump "expressed keen interest in forging a mutually beneficial trade partnership with Pakistan based on long-term strategic convergence and shared interests."

The decision to diversify military partnerships was also influenced by Pakistan's long-standing grievances with the United States, particularly its inconsistent strategic support and repeated withdrawal of assistance following periods of geopolitical convergence. Historically, the U.S. has used Pakistan to serve short-term strategic objectives, most notably during the Cold War and the War on Terror, only to disengage when priorities shifted. Recognising the fragility of such a partnership, Pakistan has increasingly sought to broaden its strategic options, engaging with other global powers, including Russia and China. This diversification has been evident since the U.S. and NATO troops' drawdown from Afghanistan in 2015, which marked a pivotal shift in regional security dynamics. Against this backdrop, the JMCC agreement between Pakistan and Russia was a significant step toward institutionalising their defence cooperation.

Since 2016, Pakistan and Russia have held annual joint military exercises under the 'Druzhba' (Friendship) series, alternating between the two countries. The 2019 iteration, hosted in Pakistan's Cherat region, involved more than 70 Russian officers and 130 Pakistani counterparts. Russia's refusal to cancel these exercises, despite pressure from India following the Uri false flag operation, demonstrated Moscow's commitment to maintaining a balanced regional posture. The cooperation has expanded beyond army-to-army exchanges to include naval and air force collaborations, professional visits, and capacity-building initiatives. Pakistan also participated in Russia's large-scale military war games in the Far East in 2015, further highlighting the growing depth of the relationship.

In the broader strategic context, many analysts view the Pakistan-Russia rapprochement as part of an emerging multipolar world order, where traditional alignments are shifting. Some scholars argue that Pakistan's growing closeness with Russia and China positions it as a strategic linchpin in countering Western influence in the region. Others attribute this shift to the unstable security situation in Afghanistan, especially concerns over the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) presence, which both Russia and Pakistan perceive as a significant threat. Petr Topychkanov²¹, a senior analyst at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), highlights Russia's concern over the U.S.'s long-term interests in Afghanistan and its growing involvement with the Taliban. Additionally, India's growing proximity to the Taliban regime and its deepening strategic partnership with the U.S., especially in balancing China, have also prompted Pakistan and Russia to re-evaluate their regional alliances.

As described by Daniel Markey, a senior scholar at Johns Hopkins University, Russia and Pakistan have found "common ground" in Afghanistan, a stark contrast from their Cold War rivalry. He argues that both countries seek to curb the spread of IS-K and diminish U.S. influence in the region. "Russia and Pakistan probably have more in common with respect to the war in Afghanistan than the United States has with either²²," he observes, calling it a "real turnaround from prior history." Beyond security and strategic alignment, economic and energy cooperation is also emerging as a key area of interest. Pakistan is being considered as a future energy corridor between Central Asia, Russia, and South Asia, with potential for oil and gas pipelines traversing Afghanistan into Pakistan. Russian energy companies are exploring options to invest in and develop this infrastructure, which could further cement bilateral ties.

Russia also demonstrated solidarity with Pakistan in times of crisis, providing humanitarian assistance after the devastating floods in 2022; a gesture that was widely appreciated and seen as an indicator of the growing warmth in bilateral relations. Indeed, while Cold War legacies once constrained the Pakistan-Russia defence relationship, it has now evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership. This transformation is driven by shifting global alliances, regional security imperatives, and a mutual interest in creating a more balanced and multipolar international order. As both nations continue to explore new areas of cooperation, their strategic convergence is likely to deepen in the years to come.

India and the Soviet Union maintained a strong alliance during the Cold War, a relationship that continued with the Russian Federation after the Soviet Union's disintegration. India has historically relied heavily on Soviet and later Russian defence systems and remains a major purchaser of Russian military equipment. Consequently, India has consistently opposed any significant military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, viewing it as a potential threat to its longstanding strategic partnership with Moscow. Russia, for its part, maintains extensive defence collaboration with India across various sectors and would be reluctant to jeopardise this relationship. In contrast, Pakistan is not deeply dependent on Russian arms; instead, it follows a selective procurement policy, acquiring affordable and non-indigenous equipment to fill specific gaps in its arsenal. Pakistan's interest in Russian weaponry is limited and strategic. During the brief Indo-Pak conflict of May 2025, Russia emphasised restraint to both sides. "There is one constant: Pakistan-Russia relations have always acted as a subset of the regional geopolitical pentagon composed of Russia, the United States, China, India and Pakistan"²³

India expressed particular concern when Russia decided to sell Mi-17 helicopters to Pakistan. Between 1996 and 2010, Russia delivered 70 Mi-17 transport helicopters to Pakistan, followed by four Mi-17 attack helicopters in 2014. These transactions stirred unease in New Delhi, which sees such military cooperation as undermining its strategic interests. According to SIPRI records, Russia remains the largest arms supplier to India. Over the last five years, Russia has supplied India with \$13 billion worth of military equipment.²⁴ Despite some willingness to engage with Pakistan, Russia remains cautious about alienating India. In 2012, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversaw the defence industry at the time, sharply responded to concerns about potential Russian arms deals with Pakistan. According to Vedomosti, he stated: "Russia always cooperates

with India to ensure regional safety. We have never created problems for India, unlike other countries. If someone says otherwise, spit in their face.”²⁵

Following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, India established a substantial presence in that country under the pretext of development and reconstruction. Throughout this entire process, India was supported by the US and NATO. However, critics argue that India used this opportunity to further its strategic interests against Pakistan, particularly by operating consulates near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. These consulates have been supporting anti-Pakistan militant groups, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), through funding, training, and logistical assistance.

After the withdrawal of US and NATO forces in 2021, Indian activities in Afghanistan decreased, mainly due to improved relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban Government. Nonetheless, TTP militants, many of whom had relocated to Afghanistan between 2014 and 2017, resumed terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Despite repeated requests and demands from Islamabad, the Taliban-led government in Kabul remained largely uncooperative. Over time, networks supported by Indian intelligence began reactivating with tacit approval from elements within the Afghan Taliban leadership.

In recent years, Indo-Taliban engagement has expanded, with a series of formal and informal meetings aimed at strengthening bilateral ties. These interactions have raised concerns in Islamabad, especially with reports suggesting they may also facilitate cross-border militancy. Groups such as the TTP, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Republican Army (BRA) have reportedly benefited from this collaboration.

A notable development took place on January 8, 2025, when India's Foreign Secretary met with the Taliban's Acting Foreign Minister in Dubai²⁶. The discussions focused on expanding bilateral relations and development cooperation. A December 2023 Wilson Centre report by Mirwais Balkhi, “BJP-Taliban Ties and Their Implications,²⁷” confirmed the frequency of these interactions and highlighted the Taliban's growing interest in strategic and military cooperation with India. Senior Taliban leaders, including Defence Minister Mullah Yaqub, have openly expressed willingness to deepen ties with New Delhi. This has led to the reopening of the Indian embassy in Kabul and trade agreements involving Iran's Chabahar Port.

These developments pose serious security concerns for Pakistan. With dedicated support from the Indian spying network, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and remnants of Afghanistan's former National Directorate of Security (NDS), militant groups like the TTP and BLA have continued cross-border terrorist attacks on Pakistan. In response, Pakistan may need to reassess its regional security strategy and present verifiable evidence to international forums to expose and counter this emerging threat.

Meanwhile, geopolitical shifts are evident. Boris Volkhonsky, head of the Asian sector at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, noted that while India typically objects to Russian arms sales to Pakistan, it does not expect such transactions to cause significant strain in India-Russia relations. This is even though both India and Pakistan have been procuring weapons from the United States without serious diplomatic fallout in the past.

In 2014, Pakistan and Russia signed a defence cooperation agreement. Pakistan later expressed interest in acquiring SU-35 fighter jets and additional Mi-35 attack helicopters, although these deals have not yet materialised. Many observers believe India is discreetly pressuring Moscow to delay or block such sales. In response, Pakistan has continued diversifying its defence procurement and deepening military collaboration with China to fulfil its strategic requirements.

Security concerns, particularly in Afghanistan, remain a central focus of the bilateral dialogue between Pakistan and Russia. Both Russia and Pakistan have expressed unease over the unstable situation under the Taliban regime and the proliferation of terrorist groups operating from Afghan soil. They advocate for a coordinated regional response involving China and the Central Asian republics to ensure peace and security in the SCO region. Unlike Western narratives, President Putin has articulated a more nuanced stance on issues like terrorism and Islamophobia. In December 2021, he publicly criticised the portrayal of Islam in Western media. He defended the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)²⁸, which was well received in Pakistan and across the Muslim world. This cultural and ideological affinity contributes to a positive perception of Russia within Pakistan.

Today, Russia and Pakistan find themselves increasingly aligned on several strategic issues. There is a growing realisation in both capitals that they

share more common interests than differences, particularly when compared to the often transactional nature of Pakistan's past relations with the United States. According to Daniel Markey of Johns Hopkins University, Russia and Pakistan may, in fact, share a more strategic alignment than Pakistan has had with the U.S. in recent years. The potential of Pakistan becoming an energy and trade corridor between Central Asia, Russia, and South Asia (and even China) adds a crucial economic dimension to this strategic partnership. Shared goals such as regional connectivity, counterterrorism, combating organised crime, controlling drug trafficking, and preventing money laundering underscore the multifaceted nature of their cooperation.

A combination of geopolitical realities and mutual strategic interests increasingly shapes the evolving strategic relationship between Pakistan and Russia. Pakistan's location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East gives it significant geopolitical value, particularly in terms of access to the Arabian Sea and proximity to key regional players. For Russia, Pakistan represents both a gateway and a partner in its pursuit of a multipolar world order, particularly in countering Western influence, ensuring regional stability, especially in Afghanistan, while enhancing cooperation with China, a common strategic ally.

Despite its strategic importance, Pakistan's geopolitical position has historically worked to its disadvantage. During the Cold War, Pakistan's alignment with the United States and the Western bloc alienated it from the Eastern bloc, notably the Soviet Union. This alliance failed to yield long-term strategic dividends for Pakistan. The 1971 disintegration of Pakistan, which occurred without substantive support from its Western allies, demonstrated the limitations and vulnerabilities of this alignment. Indeed, Pakistan's alignment with the West served the objectives of both sides rather than being mutually beneficial for either side.

In the 1980s, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan assumed the role of a frontline state, serving as a key conduit for the US-led campaign against Soviet forces. While this elevated Pakistan's strategic profile, it came at a significant cost. The United States withdrew hastily from the region, leaving behind a network of jihadist groups. The end of the Afghan war burdened Pakistan with a legacy of militancy and terrorism—direct consequences of policies shaped by the interests of major powers. Again, in 2001, Pakistan was thrust into

another unwanted conflict, once more playing the role of a frontline state—this time in the US-led Global War on Terror. Pakistan's security forces became embroiled in a prolonged internal struggle against the very militant elements that had been empowered during the previous conflict. This not only destabilised the country but also seriously compromised both state and societal security. To this day, Pakistan continues to grapple with the long-term consequences of its involvement in these externally driven wars.

Against this backdrop, the recent warming of Pak-Russia ties marks a strategic realignment grounded in realism and mutual interest. This relationship holds the potential to overcome past rivalries through the development of practical, confidence-building measures (CBMs) and a shared commitment to regional stability. One of the key areas for collaboration is Afghanistan, which remains a volatile space with the resurgence of militant groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Baloch militant groups like the BLA, BLF, and BRA. A stable Afghanistan is in the shared interest of Pakistan, Russia, China, Iran and the Central Asian republics. These countries must collaborate to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for transnational terrorism. A strategic partnership between Pakistan and Russia could act as a catalyst for broader regional cooperation and the establishment of a cohesive security and developmental framework. Russian recognition of the Afghan Taliban Government on July 4, 2025, may pave the way for a subsequent and systematic decrease of militancy and terrorism emanating from Afghan soil to its neighbours, especially Pakistan. China has already started diplomatic efforts to bridge the differences between Islamabad and Kabul.

Apart from security and terrorism, Pakistan and Russia have ample opportunities to strengthen ties in the energy and economic sectors. Pakistan's potential role as an energy transit hub between Central Asia and South Asia makes it a valuable partner for Russian energy exports. The transportation of Russian and Central Asian hydrocarbons to South Asia and even China through Pakistan would not only be economically beneficial. Still, they could also solidify regional interdependence and serve as a guarantor of regional peace and stability. Russia's energy sector, particularly its oil and gas companies, is already exploring regional reserves and infrastructure development. Furthermore, with improved ties with the Afghan Taliban and the broader acceptance of their de facto government by regional powers, the conditions for joint energy and infrastructure projects are becoming increasingly feasible.

A sustained strategic relationship between Pakistan and Russia requires a clear policy framework on both sides. The political leadership in both countries has shown a willingness to move beyond historical mistrust and explore avenues for cooperation. However, to translate this intent into tangible outcomes, both states must institutionalise dialogue, develop long-term strategic roadmaps, and establish mechanisms for economic, political, and security cooperation. Russia must also reassess its traditionally India-centric South Asia policy. While India remains a major strategic partner for Moscow, the shifting geopolitical dynamics demand a more balanced regional approach. Pakistan, for its part, should continue diversifying its foreign relations and strategically pivot towards multipolar engagement; aligning with states based on its national interests, mutual benefits and broader regional peace and stability.

As the geopolitical landscape continues to shift, Pakistan and Russia are well-positioned to deepen their bilateral relationship across multiple domains. With sincerity, political will, and a long-term vision, both countries can elevate their cooperation to new heights. As noted in the discourse surrounding their growing ties, "There is a solid foundation for constructing a multi-story building of Russia-Pakistan relations."²⁹ It is now up to both nations to seize the moment and build upon this foundation for their mutual benefit.

In a world increasingly characterised by shifting alliances and multipolarity, Pakistan and Russia have an opportunity to redefine their bilateral relationship. Shared interests in regional security, energy cooperation, and economic connectivity can serve as the foundation of a robust strategic partnership. Past rivalries and global power politics should no longer dictate the future of Pak-Russia relations. Instead, pragmatism, flexibility, and mutual respect must guide this evolving alliance. By prioritising regionalism, enhancing bilateralism, and promoting strategic autonomy, both nations can make meaningful contributions to the emerging architecture of Eurasian geopolitics, benefiting not only themselves but also the broader region.

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