

The Pakistan-Russia Relationship: Geopolitical Shift in South and Central Asia?

By [Stop NATO](#)

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The two countries have quietly been building a mutual relationship for the last few years through bilateral as well as multilateral contacts at the highest levels. Pakistan's status as an observer state in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has provided it with an important opportunity to have interaction with the top Russian leadership.

In June 2009, President Asif Ali Zardari participated in the SCO Summit in Yekaterinburg and met the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The Russian leader was reported to have expressed a strong desire to develop closer relations with Pakistan in all important areas, including defence, investment and energy.

The establishment of close contacts between the top leadership of Pakistan and Russia and the two sides readiness to open a new chapter in their relationship is not only in the interests of the two countries, it will also serve the interests of peace, security and regional integration in two of the world's important regions of Central Asia and South Asia.

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Despite being geographically contiguous, Pakistan and Russia had remained politically distant from each other during the last six decades. The framework of the Cold War and the East-West confrontation defined the relations between the two countries during that period.

Another factor that obstructed the development of close and friendly relations between Pakistan and Russia was the latter's insistence on looking at South Asia only through Indian eyes, ignoring Pakistan's vital national security concerns. But the post-Cold War transformation of global politics and fast changing geo-political situation in the region following 9/11 have created new and strong imperatives for the two to come closer and enter into productive bilateral cooperation in the political, economic and security areas.

This reality was manifestly recognised in the statements by Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar and visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at a joint press talk in Islamabad earlier this month. "We are longing for better ties with Pakistan," said Mr Lavrov; while Ms Khar termed the current millennium as "the millennium of (Pakistan's) relations with Russia." The visit of the Russian foreign minister has brought the relationship of the two countries to a new and historic threshold.

Pakistan has achieved significant diplomatic success by securing the Russian endorsement of its position on the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The Russian foreign minister, while talking to the media in Islamabad, had categorically said that his country was

against any solution of the Afghanistan problem that is imposed from outside and is not Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven. Instead, Russia would back an indigenous peace and reconciliation process owned and led by the people of Afghanistan. Similarly, the Russian condemnation of drone attacks has strengthened Pakistan's hands in ensuring the country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Russian position on Afghanistan as articulated by Foreign Minister Lavrov during his recent visit to Pakistan is clear evidence of the greater geo-strategic convergence between Pakistan and Russia on regional issues.

The two countries have quietly been building a mutual relationship for the last few years through bilateral as well as multilateral contacts at the highest levels. Pakistan's status as an observer state in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has provided it with an important opportunity to have interaction with the top Russian leadership.

With the induction of a democratic government in Pakistan following the 2008 elections, the process gained momentum and the two sides took important initiatives to promote bilateral trade, economic cooperation and regional connectivity through multilateral frameworks. In June 2009, President Asif Ali Zardari participated in the SCO Summit in Yekaterinburg and met the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The Russian leader was reported to have expressed a strong desire to develop closer relations with Pakistan in all important areas, including defence, investment and energy. According to some sources, Pakistan and Russia were contemplating entering into a commercial defence agreement enabling Pakistan to purchase Russian arms and weapons.

There is vast potential for the growth of bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Russia in a wide range of areas. Since the two sides have shown a keen desire to explore new areas and strengthen already existing cooperation in multiple fields, the coming years if not months are certain to witness an expansion of cooperation between the two countries. The areas of energy, regional connectivity, infrastructure and trade are going to be the focus of these endeavours.

However, while discussing the future prospects of Pakistan-Russia cooperation in economic and other non-political areas, the political and strategic fallout of the newly-found Russia-Pakistan friendship should also be taken into consideration, particularly by Pakistan, which has to date followed a foreign policy based on a narrow regional and global perspective.

Russia, which is a successor state to a former superpower, has its own worldview. For example, despite the establishment of a strategic partnership between India and the United States symbolised by their deal on civil nuclear cooperation, and robust Sino-India trade and economic relations, Moscow still values New Delhi as a close friend and Russian relations with Pakistan will not be at the cost of the former's relations with India. As a big stakeholder in peace and tranquillity in South Asia, the growth of the Pakistan-Russia relationship will be a further incentive for Pakistan to pursue peace and normalisation with its eastern neighbour.

The Russians have their own perspective on issues relating to militancy, terrorism and regional peace and security. They are concerned about the prospects of Afghanistan again coming under the rule of the Taliban. Although, as the statement of the Russian foreign minister in Islamabad indicated, the Russians are opposed to the permanent military presence of the United States in Afghanistan; they are frightened on the prospects of NATO failure in Afghanistan as that would lead to serious anarchy and chaos in the country. This is

why they are helping ISAF in Afghanistan by allowing their supplies through Russian territory. The Russians are also very worried about the security and law and order situation in Pakistan, particularly, the presence of a large number of foreign militants from Central Asia and Chechnya. During the meeting on the sidelines of the SCO summit at Yaketerinburg in June 2009 between President Zardari and President Medvedev, the latter was reported to have called for the elimination of safe havens of terrorists in Pakistan's tribal areas.

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