

## The Strategic Relations of Pakistan and Russia in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### Abstract

*A systematic investigation of the steps that Russia has taken after 9/11 to improve strategic relations with Pakistan gives an idea of why it is moving so carefully towards Pakistan. Now it has become important to see what kind of steps Russia has taken to further enhance strategic relations with Pakistan. In June, 2014 the Russian leadership began negotiations to provide Pakistan with state-of-the-art war helicopters to combat drug traffickers (Ullah, 2014, p.1). This development has taken as a surprise in the international community and certainly is not one that can be easily overlooked. The United States and Europe are looking disturbed and some experts have made suppositions that Russia is maneuvering the withdrawal of NATO forces by increasing instability in Afghanistan to increase its role in the aftermath of the withdrawal of NATO forces. In the new situation, Pakistan will have to be strengthened at the front of foreign policy so that it can better cope with the state of affairs that can emerge after the withdrawal of NATO forces. Some experts believe that Russia no longer wanted to make things one-sided and want to increase the role of other stakeholders of the region in the solution of Afghanistan. In the past Russia has paid extraordinary attention to India and ignored Pakistan. These experts believe that Russia now wanted to create a balance of power in the region through cooperation with Pakistan and is trying not to give too much to any one country in the world. Talks between Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Russian President Putin during the SCO summit in June 2019 were highlighted in the national media of Pakistan and Russia as well as in the international media (Pakistan eyes new horizons with Russia, 2019). The history and nature of Pakistan-Russia relations have been very unique and interesting. Pakistan and Russia relations teach the lesson that elements like sentimentality, friendship, and enmity have no place in international relations. In the modern state system, these are the national interests, based on which the two states can come closer to each other and work together to achieve their goals by putting their difference of past behind the scene.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Russia, Strategic cooperation, International politics, 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Introduction

Pakistan and Russia are two important players in regional and global politics. Pakistan has been the victim of attacks on its sovereignty by its neighbor from the very beginning which paved the way for Pakistan's accession to international security pacts designed by the global leading powers. They proved useless for Pakistan when the time for testation came in 1965 and 1971. Pakistan's decision to join the pacts like SEATO and CENTO disconnected it from the regional powers like the Soviet Union. The Cold War further strained the situation and the hostility in Russia and Pakistan relations and this situation sustained till the end of the Afghan war and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Allies of Pakistan in the Afghan war remained suspicious about the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan and it's dealing with the freedom fighters. In the people of Pakistan, the role of international powers or allies of Pakistan was also suspicious as allies were looking not ready for the acknowledgment of Pakistan's services to world peace (Muller, 2017, p.9). Further development in the region led to a situation where former allies of Pakistan in the Afghan war labeled Pakistan a threat to world peace. Pakistan has to choose the same old allies for its survival in the new Afghan war as 9/11 has brought basic changes in the ideas and opportunities of foreign policies of the world. During the war against terrorism, Pakistan became an important player in this war and it secured the opportunity to set its priorities of foreign policy as this war prolonged for nearly two decades. Pakistan has set its new goals and developed new strategies to counter its foreign policy and defense challenges. In the new

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millennium, Pakistan's goals are clear: a terrorism-free region, safety of nuclear weapons, a peaceful solution to all problems, and respect for the sovereignty of the nations. It is a matter of fact that the reprehensible actions and immoral policies of international players of politics, the peace efforts of Pakistan have weakened. Several problems emerged after 9/11 in international politics and a lot of security challenges are also emerging in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, South China Sea, Iran, Libya for the international power politics. Changing geopolitics, defense and economic conditions and emerging regional threats have paved the way for Pakistan and Russia to work together. Open cooperation is waiting between the two countries including the cooperation in the field of defense, trade, investment, economy, science, technology, agriculture, and education and there are very clear indicators for the cooperation in the field of culture. In the current era, Pakistan and Russia share common foreign policy goals, such as peaceful resolution of various global issues, international security, and multilateral world order, strengthening the United Nations as a central body in the world, and establishing the rule of law. Both countries are opposed to unilateral use of force, illegal movements to change the current international system and both are constantly looking forward to the cooperation among the other nuclear powers for the safety of nuclear weapons. In the light of the past, both Countries are agreed to cooperate for the permanent solution of Afghanistan and regional stability (The News, 2018, p.7). Looking at the importance of the topic here are the objectives of the study

1. To study the changes like relations between Pakistan and Russia in 21<sup>st</sup> Century
2. To find out the important steps in the field of cooperation between Pakistan and Russia
3. To shed light on the vision of the leadership of Pakistan and Russia for their bilateral relations

**Hypothesis:** American factor is playing an important role in the development of strategic bilateral relations between Pakistan and Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the strategic importance of these relations is visible in the changes of American policy for the South Asian region.

#### **Research Methodology**

The methodology of the present research article is an important part of this work. The collection of data for this work is based on the secondary sources of data collection primary from the articles and work published from 1988 to 2020. The descriptive model of research is used in this work is a very special model of research to give details on the specific topic. By using a descriptive model of research the details of Pakistan and Russia relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are explained in this work and the historical model of research is used to explain the background of the developments that happened between 2000 to 2020. The combination of historical and descriptive model of research has become very useful to examine the nature and changes of relations between Pakistan and Russia that made this study very important for the understandings of new arrangements in the regions where Pakistan and Russia are key players in international politics.

#### **Pakistan and Russian Strategic Relations in 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Pakistan is a very important country in the region. Pakistan is a nuclear power and the role of Pakistan will be important especially in the context of any possible settlement in Afghanistan. When Russia is emerging as a new leading player in the conflicting areas around the world the close working relations of Pakistan and Russia can become important. Russian President Putin wants to counter America's influence in the region and Pakistan's support in Afghanistan is crucial for him. After the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan the frequency of attacks on ISAF forces is increased which has increased the importance of Pakistan for Russia and America. The tensions in Pakistan and Russia relations escalated when Putin came to power in Russia due to its inclination towards India. Pakistan decided to reduce the tension and Nawaz Sharif visited Russia that was significant as he was the first prime minister of Pakistan in 25 years to visit Russia in April 1999. This visit led to the foundation of a new era after the cold war and the process continued despite the removal of civilians set up in Pakistan. Pervez Musharraf visited Moscow in 2000 and again in February 2003, prompting Russia to support Pakistan's accession to the SCO as an observer state (Donaldson, Robinson, 2014, p. 341). In 2007, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fredkov visited Pakistan, which was the first visit by a Russian leader in 38 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Pakistan was scheduled for October 2012 but postponed due to Indian pressure. However, the Russian Foreign Minister paid an immediate visit and vowed to continue the process of cooperation and development (Rytövuori, 2016, p. 199) Former Army Chief of Pakistan General Raheel Sharif visited Moscow in July 2015, as a result, Russia agreed to provide MI35 helicopters to Pakistan (Khan, 2015). In September 2016, Pakistan and Russia military exercises took place in the Ratu and Charat areas of Astor, which in India was viewed

with apprehension. After it the Pakistan and Russia relations have entered into a new era of mutual respect and trust. Russia considers Pakistan an important player in the context of Afghanistan. Russia knows that Pakistan's role in preventing the spread of terrorism in the Central Asian region can also be a "strategic pivot." Besides, Russia is showing interest in the Pakistan China Economic Corridor project, while a major impetus for proximity to Pakistan is the India-US military alliance, which is hurting Russia. Overall, Pakistan and Russia relations have seen a multi-fold increase in confidence-building between 2011 and 2016, while the warmness in Sino-Russian relations also has highlighted a positive phase for Pakistan. It has also been observed that the Kremlin no longer wants to blindly support Delhi as it has its policy in the past. It is high time that the Kremlin and Islamabad, recognizing the new realities in the rapidly changing context of global politics, looking ready to forget the bitterness of the past, and lay the foundations of a new era of peace and development in the region. With China's consent, the possibility of Russia joining the CPEC has also arisen, which will greatly benefit Russia economically. Changing geopolitics, defense, economic conditions, and growing regional threats have paved the way for Pakistan and Russia to cooperate. On the other hand, a balanced foreign policy by Russia has played an important role in bringing Pakistan and Russia to develop understanding for each other. The failure of the world powers in Afghanistan and then its neighbors like Pakistan Putting it on, China's emergence as an economic power and laying the groundwork for infrastructure throughout the region, balanced foreign policy in Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Kashmir have largely melted the ice of cold war between Pakistan and Russia (Robinson, 2019, p. 123). Pakistan is well aware of the huge economic opportunities and prospects that will arise when the CPEC project will be completed. In anticipation, Pakistan has opted for a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Union. This is an indication of how much Pakistan values Eurasia and other regions in a rapidly changing world. Russia and Pakistan also want to get closer to each other on the cultural level. A high-level Russian cultural delegation visited Pakistan and a Pakistani military band has performed at the Moscow International Music Festival (Pakistan Army Music Band Performing in Moscow, Russia, 2018). From this, entire one can gauge how serious Russia and Pakistan are about improving relations and that the changes taking place in relations are not temporary. Pakistan and Russia are well aware of the implications of what both countries are doing. The leadership of both the countries is well aware that in a world run by more than one power, Pakistan cannot ignore Eurasia and other regions in any way.

#### **New Horizons**

The new dimension of the defense relations between Pakistan and Russia began when the milestone of the defense agreement was reached in 2014. Russian Minister of Defense visited Pakistan after 45 years in 2014. The South Gas Pipeline Project Agreement was signed under which a gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore would be laid (Dawn, 2014) In September 2016, the Russian defense minister participated in joint exercises of Russian Special Forces and Pakistani Special Forces. In 2017, with the cooperation of Russia and China, Pakistan became a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The two countries agreed to open new avenues for regional security, defense, and economic cooperation. It is not possible to ignore the geographical importance of Pakistan on the world map (Rashid, 2016). Promoting the trend of joint military exercises between the two countries' armies, Russia hosted the Pakistan Navy International Conference in February 2017. Russia also participated in the Naval Exercise Peace Exercise of 2017. On July 3, 2017, the Russian company Gazprom International and the Pakistani company OGDCL completed joint development projects in Moscow. MoU on the use of art technology was signed, a major change in Russian policy under President Putin (Kapoor, 2020). Pakistan's geographical importance on the international map is the real factor. Pakistan is the natural way to connect Russia and Central Asia, Africa and Asia. To use Pakistan as a gateway the stability in Afghanistan is important and in this context Russia-India relations, China's economic revolution, the Belt and Road project, and so on many other projects are mater of discussion in the international political forums. Pakistan and Russia have been forced to revisit and improve their bilateral relations. The recent closeness between Pakistan and Russia will help set new milestones for both countries in the future and strengthening the regional cooperation. If Russia tries to get closer to Pakistan for its interests, India may lean more towards the United States to find better prospects for its interests. The United States of America could create a disturbing situation for Pakistan by providing extraordinary assistance to India to improve its position in the region and to wash away many of the stains on its diplomatic and military capabilities.

In the event of any such situation, the United States and its western allied region can raise a new security issue and reassure India that Russia's changing diplomatic and strategic priorities are extremely dangerous to its security (Robinson, 2020, p. 161). If the United States and its Western allies continue their support for India against China and Pakistan the stability in the south Asian region will become a dream. Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan has said in an interview with Russian news agency Sputnik that defense cooperation between Russia and Pakistan can be further enhanced. He has said that Pakistan remains an ally of the United States in the 1950s, 1960's and 1970's but the situation has changed after 9/11. Pakistan has established cordial relations with Russia and it is increasing day by day. Replying to a question on Russian arms purchases, Prime Minister Imran Khan says that we are in tension with India. We want to reduce tension so that we do not have to buy weapons. We want to spend our money on human welfare, but we must not forget that the Pakistan Army is currently in constant contact with the Russian Army. According to Prime Minister Imran Khan, the biggest clash between Pakistan and India is over Kashmir. The Prime Minister says that visa rules have also been relaxed to promote investment and tourism in Pakistan and Russia is also among those 70 countries in the world to apply for visas at airports. The centers of power in the world are changing or new centers of power are being formed. Therefore, in the new world order, the best relations with Russia are the guarantee of Pakistan's security (International, 2020).

#### **Opportunities and Vulnerabilities for Russia and Pakistan**

The United States of America can't stay fluctuating in the rapidly changing regional situation. America will like India and Russia to have the same distances as Russia and the European Union. With the help of information technology, the United States will do whatever it can to gross the fact that the United States is currently India's largest supplier of defense arms and it should not be overlooked. The Indian military is now relying on US military equipment. There is no doubt that 5 percent of India's military equipment (including weapons and aircraft, etc.) is still Russian-made and formerly Soviet-era, but it must be borne in mind that the Indian leadership is busy purchasing the most advanced American arms and it is going to become a leading nation like Europe, relying on American weapons and equipment. Soviet-era military equipment is now being unglued from the Indian Army (Sengupta, 2019, p. 4). Israel is also providing state-of-the-art weapons to India. India is currently the largest buyer of Israeli weapons and other military equipment. Russia may at some point have to reconsider its decision on military exports to Pakistan. This situation is by no means very good and favorable for Russia. It is also worth noting that India is now being used by the USA against China. The issue of India's security seems to be in the hands of the United States (Javaid, 2020), pp. 3-4). Now the point is that the more the Indian leadership resents and moves away from Russia, the more the American leadership will take root in India, and obviously, all this will not happen without obvious negative effects. The negative effects of US foreign policy have ultimately been felt by every country to which the United States supported in past. If the two leaders of India and America agree to work together, it can be said that the United States and India will have a chance to get closer to each other and the two countries will work together to change the overall situation in the region in many aspects. The personal rapport between Indian and American leadership has been very pleasing to the bilateral relationship that helps the two to understand each other's strengths and weaknesses in various fields. The path to change seems to be smooth. It seems that America wants things to improve between India and Russia to some extent so that there is not much room for a strategic partnership between Pakistan and Russia to flourish (Maria, 2020). All of this could be extremely troubling for Russia, as the Russian leadership also realizes that whatever the United States is doing is not just to protect its interests, one of its main goals is to counter Russian emerging role in the region. Russia's policy of looking east in most cases can no longer be digested by the United States, Europe, and Canada. Now the test of Vladimir Putin's ability to convince India that Russia still attaches great importance to friendship with India (Emkin, 2020, pp. 3-4). Only a successful effort in this regard can stop India from coming to terms with the United States. If Putin fails, it will be easier for the USA to mold India.

The new development in the new millennium brings the stage of dirty politics. America is an expert in this game as it certainly would not want or tolerate Pakistan entering the realm of Russia and China. As far as China is concerned, things are going well, but Pakistan's inclination towards Russia is very provocative for the United States. If the strategic partnership between Russia and Pakistan takes shape, India's position will be very strange. Indian reservations will increase and every moment

the feeling that India is being surrounded will grow. In such a scenario, it will be inevitable for India to go against China, Russia, and Pakistan. This compulsion can also cause extraordinary damage to Indian economic interests. The United States does not want any such confusion for India (Rajat, 2020). The case of Baluchistan is extremely troubling. Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest province by area has a very small population. It is of great strategic importance. On the one hand, it is connected with Afghanistan and Iran, and on the other hand, the fact that the port of Gwadar is also in the same province cannot be ignored. The success of the Gwadar Port has led to extraordinary economic transformation throughout the region. The Gwadar port is no less important for Russia. Afghanistan can also benefit from this. The Gwadar port can be used to lead the strategic partnership between Russia, China, Pakistan, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Pakistan already complains that India has tried to create imbalance in the region by backing separatist elements in Baluchistan. The possibility of US involvement in this matter cannot be ruled out. It is also in America's interest that the CPEC cannot succeed. To this end, America can use any country to deteriorate the situation in Baluchistan. It is not that the US is taking an interest in the affairs of Baluchistan for any petty interest. There is no doubt that separatism in Baluchistan will increase the difficulties for Pakistan's leadership and make it extremely difficult to complete and benefit from the CPEC project. At the same time, a fragmented and internally divided Pakistan can be more effective for US interests. But above all, the deteriorating situation in Baluchistan will create problems not only in Pakistan but also in Iran and Afghanistan. In this way, wider interests can be ensured by destabilizing a region. If things go wrong in Baluchistan, Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province will also be destabilized. In such a scenario, it will not be possible for India to complete the Chah-e-Bihar project with Iran and connect this port to Central Asia and Russia. Incautious terms, the instability of Baluchistan can be extremely detrimental to India itself (Ahmad, 2020). The problematic Baluchistan will also affect Iran and as a result, it will be very difficult for India to implement many strategic plans with Iran. If the Chah-e-Bihar project is completed, it may be possible to connect Iran to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia by rail. The United States certainly does not want that. By putting conditions at stake for India's investment in infrastructure for Iran and Russia, the United States may gradually increase pressure on India to be in a position to persuade American vision (Gupta & Wadhwa, 2020, p. 188). Similar pressure can be put on Tehran. It is inevitable to mention here Ralph Peterson's infamous "Bloody Borders" map showing Baluchistan as an independent state. This state consists of the territories of Pakistan and Iran (Ahmad, 2020). Terrorism has been a serious problem for Pakistan for more than two decades. Terrorists continue to harm Pakistani interests in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and across the border in Afghanistan. This issue has been extremely troubling for the entire country. The deteriorating situation in Baluchistan has created more challenges for the political and military leadership and forced Pakistan to think about Russia as an option. It is also imperative for Pakistani forces to deal with the darkness created by extremists in FATA. Terrorism is not an issue to be ignored. Keeping in mind the situation in the Pakistan and Afghan border area, it is estimated that this one issue could meet many economic and strategic possibilities. Pakistan needs to deal with terrorism. Both China and Russia understand this phenomenon. This thing makes the possibility of Pakistan and Russia a close working relationship. On the other hand, there is India, whose interests are linked to the interests of the United States. This situation demands that there should be instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. The extremist forces are marching and the southeastern region cannot be ignored either by Russia and America. Russian leadership started to develop a strategy of new engagements in the region after a strong signal in its neighbor. Colonel Gulmurod Klimov, Tajikistan's chief of Special Forces, defected to the extremists in May 2017, signaling that extremists have paved the way for takeover in any state of the region. Extremists are in a better position in Tajikistan and anything can be expected at any time. A strong group of supporters of former Defense Minister Abdul Haleem Nazarzada can come to the fore to implement Sharia law in the country. Col. Gulmurod Klimov may be aware that those who have clashed with the state machinery have become so powerful that they can keep their word, and as a result, the country may change color. If such a situation arises, the semi-autonomous region between Gorno and Badakhshan could be a good platform for people like Gulmurod Klimov. The situation in Kyrgyzstan is also changing. The United States could also take advantage of the instability in southern Kyrgyzstan to retaliate. Kyrgyzstan has terminated all agreements with the United States, resulting in the US leadership strongly disliking Kyrgyzstan (Mickolus, 2018, p. 214). Circumstances are fascinating for extremists and alarming for

Russia, America, and regional states. All these developments indicate that a relatively small caliphate may emerge from Central Asia to South Asia, which may include parts of Pakistan as a southern part that has connected Pakistan to become part of this issue. These developments in the region have played a role to push Pakistan and Russia to work together in the field of defense and foreign policies.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan, Russia, and China will have to work very carefully to gain a foothold in the region. Any unusual move by them will make matters worse. In such a scenario, Russia will have to address all concerns of India and at the same time try to keep the balance between Islamabad and New Delhi as balanced as possible so that it can realize its wider economic potential. If the Russian leadership fails to play its part to resolve the issues among the Asian nations, the United States can manage to sabotage the efforts of China and Russia through its special mechanism. After it in the context of strategic relations of Pakistan and Russia, the Russian position can become weakened, and its efforts to improve relations with Pakistan can be affected. On the other side, Russia will be in a worse position, if the Russian leadership lets go of a friend like India. In such a case Russia will get a much smaller and less important Pakistan. It cannot be ignored that even if the friendship of Pakistan with Russia reaches some level to choose between Russia and China, Pakistan will take the side of China. Now the real test for the Russian leadership is to conduct matters with the utmost balance so that the establishment in New Delhi does not become more hostile to Russia's growing relations with Pakistan and does not prefer to shorten the scope of relations with India (Jain, 2019 128). The possibility cannot be ruled out or overlooked that just as the United States used Ukraine to create a rift between Russia and the European Union, it also can use Pakistan to create a rift between Russia and India. - The way the United States has been targeting Russia through information warfare requires the Russian leadership to exercise extreme caution and stay in close touch with the Pakistani leadership to better deal with any undesirable situation. Looking broadly the biggest challenge for the Russian leadership is to save the old friendship with India and keeping Pakistan in confidence (Ameen, 2019). In the 21st century, the Eurasian region is working hard to become a land of great economic potential. The center of power is shifting from west to east. In such a situation, the difficulties for the United States are increasing and so is its cynicism. The European Union has distanced itself from the process. One reason for this is that it doesn't see much charm in it and the other main reason is that it is still under pressure from the United States. Most European countries still think that their economic and strategic interest is in looking across the Atlantic, not in Eurasia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The Eurasian Union, Iran, SAARC, and China want to work together to create a great economic region with potential for all. It seems that friends and foes are changing on the international scene. Terror-ridden Pakistan does not want to be part of any new conflict in the Middle East. Strict conditions for Western aid have forced Pakistan to look the other way. United States of America and the west do not trust the sustainability in the bilateral relations of Pakistan and Russia, meanwhile the importance of Pakistan for peace in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. In these circumstances, China and Russia can work on a great road map in which CPEC will be the source of relations that will result in the realization of Pakistan's geographical importance, and for the reason the coming together of Russia and Pakistan on a single platform is not unusual. On various fronts, relations between Pakistan and Russia seem to be improving. In this regard, China, Russia, and Pakistan have made trilateral efforts to resolve the Afghan issue in the same way that Russia, Turkey, and Iran have continued their efforts to jointly resolve the Syrian issue. In Syria, although the interests of the three countries appear to be different in some places, their coordination on some important issues has forced the United States to withdraw from Syria to some extent. However, the issue of Afghanistan remains unresolved.

When President Trump began making open statements against Pakistan, there was a growing sense in Pakistan that it needed to redefine its foreign policy, which would lead to other realities in the region rather than trusting the United States. If the current ups and downs of relations with the United States are not allowed to affect the long-distance relations with China, Russia, and other important countries in the region, then Pakistan will surely be able to move in a positive direction in terms of foreign relations and economic policies.

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