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Russia – Pakistan
Cooperation
&
Challenges for India

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Russia – Pakistan Cooperation and Challenges for India

Abstract

The Cold War bloc politics prevented Russia and Pakistan from establishing a long-term, constructive relationship. However, shifting geopolitical dynamics, marked by great power rivalry and changing alliances, has created favourable conditions for both countries to bridge their differences and develop a pathway towards a strategic partnership. Over the past decade, Russia and Pakistan, it appears, have made significant strides to strengthen and stabilise their relation. In light of the current global environment, this article seeks to explore Russia's concerns with Pakistan, their growing cooperation, and assesses the potential implications of their warming ties for India.

Keywords: Russia-Pakistan Relations, Regional Stability, Terrorism, Economic Cooperation

Introduction

The contemporary geopolitical landscape has undergone profound transformations since the end of the bipolar world order. Now, as the world grapples with evolving power dynamics, countries are re-evaluating their foreign policies to adapt to new realities. India, long known for its non-aligned stance, has too embraced a multi-aligned approach — balancing its interests between global powers while navigating the shifting tides of international relations. Additionally, Russia's growing closeness with Pakistan has added another layer of complexity to the South Asian geopolitical environment.

Russia's Main Concerns with Pakistan

Russia's primary concerns with Pakistan are closely linked to issues of terrorism and drug trafficking, both of which have significant implications for regional stability. Russia is deeply concerned about the ongoing threat of terrorism emanating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan provides a safe haven for various terrorist groups, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP), which can destabilise both South and Central Asia. In March 2024, ISKP claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall that killed at least 133 people and wounded more than 100 (Varshalomidze, 2024, March 23). Three months later, in June 2024, Russia faced yet another terrorist attack in Dagestan that killed 20

people and injured 46 (Astier & Gozzi, 2024, June 24). Even though no group officially claimed responsibility for the attack, ISKP praised the attackers saying that it was carried out by “brothers in the Caucasus who showed that they are still strong” (OHCHR, 2024). Thus, for Russia, the presence of these extremist groups is a direct threat to its own security interests, as they have the potential to spread violence and disrupt regional peace.

Another challenge is the influx of illicit drugs from Afghanistan — a major producer of opium, with networks passing through Pakistan into Central Asia and beyond. The Afghan drug supplies to the Russian market has exacerbated conflict, corruption, and instability in the region. Even though Taliban’s ban on opium cultivation since 2021 has been effective, Afghanistan has seen a rise in the production of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine (Alcis, n.d.; UN, 2023). The drastic increase in meth, indicates that trafficking networks are expanding, which can lead to financing terrorist organisations and further contribute to a severe addiction crisis in the region. The flow of drugs, entering the region from Pakistan, exacerbates Russia's own drug abuse problems, thus contributing to rising addiction rates and health crises. In 2020, a total of 18,013 people were overdosed on illicit drugs, out of which 7,366 died—representing a 16% increase over 2019 (Hellman, 2022).

Additionally, the drug trade flowing into Central Asia, aggravated by the region's proximity to Afghanistan, significantly undermines the security of many former Soviet Republics. The trafficking of narcotics through these countries contributes to the destabilisation of local governments and creates a breeding ground for organised crime and terrorism. Lack of effective border security, weak state institutions, and insufficient transnational cooperation allows drug trafficking networks to operate with relative impunity, further entrenching instability.

Thus, with a strong footprint of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Afghanistan (Gupta, 2025, January 11), Russia sees cordial relations with Pakistan as a way to mitigate regional security threats, which can affect Russia and the Central Asian Region. These stable ties can also help curb the spread of extremist groups like TTP and ISKP to ensure better counterterrorism cooperation and address the flow of illicit drugs from Afghanistan, which contributes to instability and addiction problems in the region.

Areas of Russia – Pakistan Cooperation

Over the past decade, Russia and Pakistan have demonstrated a strong political will to cooperate with each other on various areas. Both nations have shown increased commitment towards strengthening measures to combat terrorism, improve defence ties, increase trade and economic cooperation as well as bilateral and multilateral engagements to reshape their approach towards enhancing regional security.

Counterterrorism

Moscow and Islamabad are actively engaged in countering terrorism. Russia and Pakistan have a Bilateral Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism to enhance regional security cooperation. In November 2023, Islamabad hosted the 10th meeting of the Joint Working Group wherein both the sides “shared their national experience in combating terrorism and extremism, exchanged views on terrorist threats at the global and regional levels and reaffirmed their readiness to strengthen constructive counterterrorism cooperation both on a bilateral basis and in international organizations, primarily at the UN and the SCO” (Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 2023). They also discussed several key counterterrorism measures, including strategies to combat radicalisation and prevent terrorists from utilising modern technologies and ways to stop the spread of extremist ideologies and cut off financial support for terrorist activities. President Putin has also previously expressed support for “Pakistan's stance on war on terror” (Dawn, 2011, November 7) while both nations have agreed to collaborate on regional efforts to combat extremist activities.

The two countries have significantly bolstered their counterterrorism cooperations through joint military exercises, such as the Druzhba series. Started in 2016 “Druzhba”, meaning “friendship” in Russian, primarily focuses on counterterrorism operations. Till 2024, seven bilateral joint military exercise have been held in the counterterrorism domain. These exercises contribute to enhancing mutual understanding, facilitating the exchange of best practices, and improving operational coordination in the fight against terrorism.

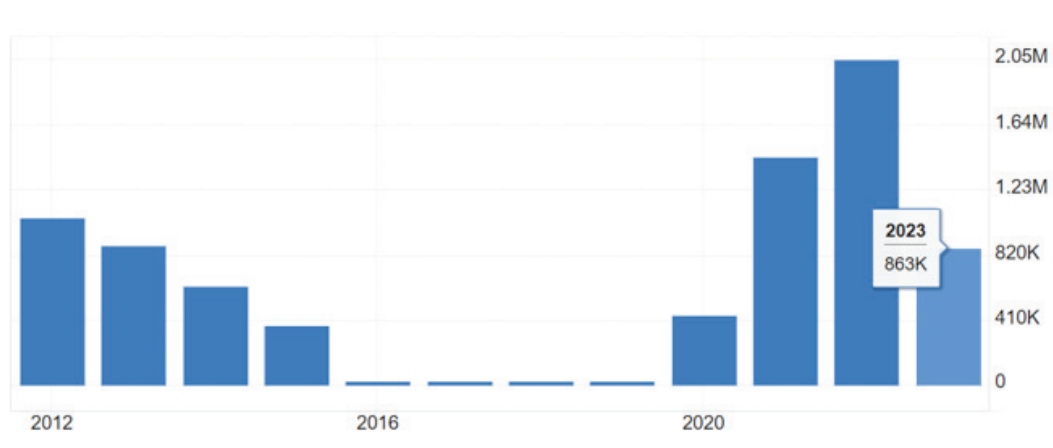
Druzhba VII, which commenced on 13 October 2024, involved “special forces from the Pakistan Army and a contingent of 54 Russian troops, who participated in training drills and counter-terrorism techniques” (The Express Tribune, 2024, October 25). Furthermore, the

exercise is designed to enhance professional skills through joint training, while also reinforcing the longstanding military-to-military relations between the two nations.

Defence

Russia and Pakistan's defence cooperation has evolved since the visit of the former Russian Military Chief Colonel-General Aleksandr Postnikov to Pakistan in 2011— making him the first Russian senior military official to visit Pakistan after the Afghan War in 1980s (Yousaf, 2011, May 25). This also saw reciprocal visits to Moscow by former Pakistan Air Chief Marshal Tahir Rafiq Butt in August 2012, followed by former Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani in October 2012 (Khan, 2019, June 3). These visits paved the way for future defence collaboration between the two sides, particularly when Postnikov suggested the potential for enhancing defence relations through “joint military exercises, exchanging of trainees and trainers and the buying and selling of weapons” (Dawn, 2011, September 17).

However, notable achievement in the defence relations was made when Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Islamabad in 2014 to formalise the Defence Cooperation Agreement (Syed, 2014, November 21). The Agreement outlined the exchange of information on political and military matters, cooperation aimed at enhancing international security, the intensification of counterterrorism and arms control efforts, and the strengthening of collaboration across various military domains including education, medicine, history, topography, hydrography and culture. Consequently, Russia lifted the arms embargo on Pakistan in 2014 and both the countries have started to cooperate in areas of defence and military. In 2014 itself, both the nations were negotiating the sale of a number of Mi-35 attack helicopters (The Moscow Times, 2014, June 2). In 2015, Moscow was also in talks to deliver Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets to Islamabad (Dawn, 2015, September 10). These sales of defence equipment to Pakistan and joint military exercises signalled a notable change in Russia's foreign policy.

Figure: Pakistan Imports from Russia of Arms and Ammunition

Source: Trading Economics

Joint military drills are another indication of the blossoming mutual interest among these two nations. The naval forces of both countries participated in the 'Arabian Monsoon' exercises in 2014 and again in 2015 (Dawn, 2017, April 1), followed by the 'Druzha' joint military exercise in 2016. The AMAN exercise in 2017, also saw the participation of the Russian Navy's largest anti-submarine warship 'Severmorsk' (Dawn, 2017).

In September 2017, the two militaries conducted their second joint exercises – the Druzha 2017. The drills, held in the mountain range near Nizhny Arkhyz settlement in Karachay- Cherkess, Russia, was attended by 200 troops and special forces commanders from both countries (RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal, 2017, September 25). In April 2018, General Qamar Bajwa, the third consecutive Chief of the Pakistan Army, visited Moscow, where the two nations established the Joint Military Commission (Dagia, 2021, June 23). That same month, the national security advisors of both countries conducted high-level security talks in Moscow. Following this, the frequency of military delegation exchanges between Moscow and Islamabad increased.

Another key platform for military cooperation between the two countries is the Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC). The first JMCC meeting took place in Rawalpindi in August 2018 (Saud & Abbasi, 2024). The second meeting was held in Moscow in 2019, where discussions focused on areas of mutual cooperation, including intelligence sharing, joint exercises, military training, and defence industry collaboration (Pakistan, Russia reaffirm commitment to enhance military ties 2019) {Saud & Abbasi, 2024}. In September 2021, the third JMCC meeting was held between Pakistan's Defence Secretary and Russia's Deputy

Defence Minister, with discussions also covering regional stability and the evolving situation in Afghanistan (Saud & Abbasi, 2024).

Regional Stability

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and the subsequent Taliban takeover, created significant uncertainty regarding the influence of non-state actors in the region. For Russia, this uncertainty heightened concerns about the potential spread of terrorism and drug trafficking across Central Asia, which could directly affect Russian security. Similarly, Pakistan, which shares an extensive border with Afghanistan, has consistently underscored that its own peace and stability are closely linked to the stability of Afghanistan. Thus, developments in Afghanistan serves as a common factor for cooperation between Pakistan and Russia.

In November 2024, at a meeting held between Russian Special Envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov and Pakistan Foreign Secretary Amna Baloch in Islamabad, both sides stressed on closer coordination between regional countries for a “peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan” (Latif, 2024, November 14). Prior to this, in April 2023, Pakistani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar, and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, met on the sidelines of the 4th Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan conference in Samarkand, where they affirmed on the importance of close consultation— “continued close consultation to promote the shared objective of a peaceful, stable, sovereign and prosperous Afghanistan” (Radio Pakistan, 2023, April 2023).

Thus, in response to global challenges, both Russia and Pakistan came to recognise the limitations of isolation and the essential need for cooperation. This shared understanding facilitated the development of a more pragmatic and collaborative approach, culminating in joint efforts to address common security threats.

Bilateral/Multilateral Engagements

Formal agreements and regular high-level dialogues have further solidified both countries collaboration. The tenth meeting of the Pakistan-Russia Joint Working Group held in November 2023, focused on addressing global and regional terrorist threats particularly in Afghanistan, Central and South Asia and North Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan,

2024). These included discussions on strengthening bilateral counter-terrorism efforts, enhancing cooperation in multilateral forums like the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); as well as combating terrorism financing, radicalisation and the misuse of information technologies for terrorist purposes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2024). Through these regular dialogues, both nations reaffirm their commitment to continued cooperation in tackling the security challenges. Furthermore, these measures have also been important for intelligence sharing and border security management when addressing transnational threats.

Pakistan's full membership in the SCO in 2017 has provided an avenue for enhanced bilateral relations with Russia. Within the SCO, both countries engage in discussions on regional security, counterterrorism, and economic integration. The organisation serves as a platform for Russia and Pakistan to conduct joint military exercises, foster trust-building initiatives, and address common challenges such as extremism and instability in Central Asia. The SCO's emphasis on multilateral cooperation allows both nations to enhance their strategic dialogue and deepen their security and defence ties.

While Pakistan is not a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the organisation's activities and Russia's leadership within it have nonetheless facilitated indirect cooperation with Pakistan. The CSTO, primarily a collective security alliance among former Soviet Republics, provides Russia with opportunities to engage Pakistan on broader regional security concerns, including counterterrorism efforts and the stabilisation of neighbouring Afghanistan. Through these regional security frameworks, Russia and Pakistan can strengthen their mutual understanding and collaboration in addressing shared security challenges.

Economic Cooperation

On the sidelines of a summit of SCO's Heads of Government meeting in Islamabad held on October 2024, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and his Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin agreed to maintain "close cooperation in the fields of trade, industry, energy, connectivity, science, technology and education" (Latif, 2024a, October 16).

Energy sector is one of the main areas of cooperation between Russia and Pakistan. Both have agreed to build the 1100km long Pakistan Stream natural gas pipeline project (Kaya,

2024, May 28). The project aims to improve Pakistan's energy security and reduce its reliance on expensive energy imports. This aligns with Pakistan's efforts to address its growing energy needs, especially in light of the ongoing energy shortages and the rising cost of imported LNG. In 2024, these discussions have advanced, with the potential for more energy deals between the two countries (Bhutta, 2024, December 12).

In 2023, Russia also agreed to supply crude oil to Pakistan at discounted prices to help address Islamabad's increasing domestic and industrial energy demands. Under this agreement 45,000 metric tonnes of crude oil were sent to Pakistan as part of the first cargo (Hussain, 2023, June 12). Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia faced sanctions from Western powers, leading to a reduction in its oil and gas exports to the European Union and the United States. Thus, this agreement has given Moscow access to new Pakistani markets.

Moreover, bilateral trade in the year 2023, between Russia and Pakistan were seen to be amounting to USD 1 billion (Hussain & Ahmed, 2024, September 19). Furthermore, in 2024, Russia and Pakistan signed barter deals to limit currency risks amidst the former's conflict with Ukraine. Astarta-Agrotrading, a Russian company had agreed to supply 20,000 tonnes of chickpeas in exchange for 20,000 tonnes of rice from Pakistan's Meskay & Femtee Trading Company. In a separate agreement, Astarta agreed to supply 15,000 tonnes of chickpeas and 10,000 tonnes of lentils in exchange for 15,000 tonnes of mandarins and 10,000 tonnes of potatoes from Pakistan (Reuters, 2024, October 2). According to TASS, as Russia and Pakistan face challenges in conducting mutual payments, establishment of a barter trade between the two companies would be an innovative way of doing business (TASS, 2023, January 20).

Implications on India

Russia and Pakistan ties have taken significant strides, reflecting broader geo-political shifts and regional challenges. One such key development is Russia's invitation for Pakistan to join the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Sharif, 2024, June 20), a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing trade connectivity across the region. This partnership aligns with Pakistan's efforts to improve its trade infrastructure and expand access to Russian markets. Additionally, Russia has expressed its support for Pakistan's bid to join the BRICS (Gul, 2024, September 19), signalling a growing alignment between the two countries on the global stage.

However, despite Russia's trust on Pakistan, the former is unlikely to strain its longstanding relationship with India. India remains an essential partner for Russia, particularly in the defence sector and Moscow is cautious about making any moves that might alienate New Delhi. Nevertheless, the growing defence and counterterrorism cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, especially in light of India's increasing ties with Washington, could lead to a shift in regional dynamics over time.

While India may view Russia's growing engagement with Pakistan with concern, the relationship between Russia and India remains robust. Historically, Russia has been India's primary defence supplier, and the two countries share deep strategic ties, particularly around global security, terrorism and Indo-Pacific stability. However, Russia's share of arms exports to India has been steadily declining, from 76 per cent between 2009-13 to 36 per cent between 2019-23 (Wezeman et al., 2024). India has increasingly turned to Western suppliers like France and the United States, as well as boosting its own domestic defence industry. This shift in India's defence procurement could diminish Russia's influence over India's military strategy, potentially driving Moscow to seek alternative partnerships, including with Pakistan, to bolster its defence export market.

Although, Russia and Pakistan have expanded cooperation through platforms like the SCO and the CSTO, these engagements primarily focus on regional security concerns, such as terrorism and drug trafficking, which India also shares. As a member of the SCO, India participates in dialogues involving both Russia and Pakistan, thus creating opportunities for trilateral cooperation that could reduce potential friction.

Overall, Moscow's evolving relationship with Islamabad, while noteworthy, is largely driven by practical concerns related to Central Asia and Afghanistan rather than a strategic pivot away from India. Russia will continue to engage with Pakistan in the foreseeable future, however this interaction is likely to be carried out with due consideration to Indian sensitivities. Even though the Russia-Pakistan engagement is viewed with concern for India, it should not be seen as a direct challenge to its strong bilateral relations with Russia.

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