

The Evolution of Russia-Pakistan Relations in the Context of Regional Cooperation: A Contemporary Study

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Abstract: *The relationship between Russia and Pakistan has long been a subject of intrigue and scrutiny in the realm of international relations. This research paper delves into the intricacies of their evolving bond within the framework of regional cooperation, exploring the historical context, geopolitical landscapes, and thematic areas of collaboration. By carefully examining the ebb and flow of their relations, the study sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of their present-day partnership. It uncovers the multifaceted nature of Russia-Pakistan's engagement through a nuanced exploration of the South Asian geopolitical dynamics, including the interplay between India-Pakistan relations and Russia-India ties. Moreover, it unveils their joint efforts in the Afghan peace process, shedding light on the pivotal role of Afghanistan in shaping their relationship. With a nuanced perspective on the opportunities and obstacles for regional cooperation between these two states, this paper enriches our understanding of the evolving dynamics in politics, security, and economic integration in the broader South Asian context.*

Key Words: Regional Cooperation, Geo-Political, Security, Economic Integration

Introduction

Russia and Pakistan, two significant actors in the geopolitics of Eurasia and South Asia, have witnessed a dynamic and evolving relationship. The historical context of their interactions reveals periods of both tension and rapprochement, influenced by geopolitical factors and regional dynamics. This research paper provides an analytical review of the multifaceted nature of Russia-

Pakistan relations, focused on the opportunities and challenges for regional cooperation. It explores the historical context of Russia-Pakistan relations, analyzes the geopolitical landscape and its impacts on bilateral ties, and examines thematic areas of cooperation between the two countries. Furthermore, the study underlines the challenges in deepening their

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relations and identifies potential avenues for future cooperation. By undertaking this analysis, an insight into the evolving dynamics of Russia-Pakistan relations within the broader framework of regional cooperation is sought.

Historical Context of Russia-Pakistan Relations

Cold War Period

During the Cold War, Russia (then the Soviet Union) and Pakistan's relationship was fraught with mutual distrust and hostility. Relations between them were strained because of Pakistan's close military association with the United States as part of military pacts: Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). This strained relationship between Moscow and Islamabad was partially caused by the tight ties that Pakistan maintained with the United States of America, which the Soviet Union regarded as a significant foe ([Gul, 2018](#)). The United States considered Pakistan an important strategic ally in its fight to curb the expansion of communism in South Asia and offset its influence in the region. Therefore, Pakistan was provided significant economic and military aid, including the sale of armaments to its armed forces. The Soviet Union viewed Pakistan's partnership with the United States as a threat to its interests in the region. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, a crucial event, escalated tensions between Pakistan and the Soviet Union. The United States of America, together with Pakistan, was an extremely important factor in the success of the Afghan resistance movement against the forces of the Soviet Union. The United States provided military and financial help to the Afghan mujahideen fighting against the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan through Pakistan. Pakistan became an essential route for this assistance ([Mohan, 2021](#)).

The Soviet Union understood Pakistan's assistance to Afghan resistance as a direct threat to its presence in Afghanistan and an attempt to undermine its influence in the region ([Chia & Haiqi, 2021](#)). During the entire period of the Cold War, the Soviet Union gave unwavering assistance to Pakistan's archrival, India, raising the existing suspicion and hostility between the two states. In spite of such tense relations, there were instances of diplomatic contact between the two nations. Both parties acknowledged the necessity for limited collaboration on key matters like trade and regional security. Despite being limited in breadth, these efforts for collaboration laid the framework for future interactions, setting the stage for improved cooperation in the era of Post-cold War. In essence, the Soviet Union and Pakistan had strained relations due to Pakistan's association with the United States and the competing geopolitical objectives of the two states. In the backdrop of the Cold War, Pakistan's alliance with the United States contributed to the mistrust and hostility that characterized their bilateral relations throughout this time period ([Rashid & Tahir, 2021](#)).

Post-Cold War Period

The post-Cold War period witnessed a gradual shift in Russia-Pakistan relations, marked by a transition from tension and mistrust to fostering diplomacy and building mutual trust. Several factors contributed to this shift, allowing both countries to reassess their bilateral relations and explore avenues for cooperation. First, the end of the Cold War resulted in a

fundamental transformation of the global geopolitical landscape. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted Russia to reset its foreign policy priorities and provided an opportunity to engage with countries previously considered adversaries or distant from its sphere of influence, including Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan's own foreign policy objectives underwent significant changes in the post-Cold War era. The Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, combined with the collapse of the communist regime, altered the regional dynamics and presented Pakistan with new opportunities for engagement ([Chia & Haiqi, 2021](#)). Pakistan sought to diversify its foreign policy options and reduce its dependence on any single power, including the United States.

Furthermore, both Russia and Pakistan recognized the need for stability in the region, particularly in relation to Afghanistan. The protracted Afghan conflict and the subsequent power vacuum posed security challenges for both countries. The shared concerns and interests like rising extremist and terrorist elements and the potential for regional stability provided a basis for dialogue and cooperation. In the 1990s, diplomatic efforts and high-level visits between Russia and Pakistan laid the groundwork for improved relations ([Syed, 2014](#)). Diplomatic channels were established and exchanges between political leaders and officials became frequent.

Economic considerations played a vital role in the shift towards cooperation. Both Russia and Pakistan recognized the potential for increased trade and economic cooperation. Efforts were initiated to explore avenues for trade and investment leading to the signing of bilateral agreements in various sectors: energy, agriculture, and defence ([Takar, 2022](#)). The

gradual shift towards trade and diplomacy in the Post-Cold War period was driven by geopolitical, regional, and economic factors. The changing global landscape, Pakistan's evolving foreign policy priorities, shared concerns about regional stability, and the recognition of economic opportunities all contributed to the improvement of Russia-Pakistan relations during this time. This shift laid the foundation for the deepening of bilateral ties in subsequent years.

The Geopolitical Landscape and Its Impact on Russia-Pakistan Relations

The South Asian Factor

The complex geopolitical landscape of South Asia, particularly the relations between India and Pakistan and Russia's relationship with India significantly influences Russia-Pakistan ties. The deep-seated conflict between India and Pakistan has implications for the dynamics of Russia's engagement with both countries ([Gul, 2018](#)). India and Pakistan have a long-standing history of conflicts and territorial disputes, particularly over the region of Jammu and Kashmir. The Kashmir dispute, a major source of the strained relations, has shaped the strategic calculations of both states. Russia as a major global player has always been inclined to India's stance on Kashmir, advocating for a resolution through bilateral dialogue and in accordance with international law.

Pakistan has often perceived Russia's ties with India as favouring its regional rival ([Mohan, 2021](#)). This perception has at times strained Russia-Pakistan relations and hindered the prospects for closer cooperation. However, Russia has also maintained a policy of engaging with Pakistan to balance its relations in the region, recognizing Pakistan's strategic importance and its potential role in

promoting stability. Russia's relationship with India, known as the "special and privileged strategic partnership," encompasses various dimensions, including defence cooperation, trade, and cultural exchanges ([Mohan, 2021](#)). This robust partnership strengthened military ties, promoted joint exercises, and transferred defence technology between Russia and India. Russia's inclination to India in this regional tripolar relationship though an impact on Russia-Pakistan ties, its relations with Pakistan are pursued in light of its strategic interests and not conditioned by the hostility of the two neighbours.

Despite the rising constraints of the India-Pakistan rivalry, Russia has sought to engage simultaneously with both countries multiple times. For instance, Russia has been supportive of peace talks and dialogue between India and Pakistan to address their outstanding issues, including the Kashmir dispute. Furthermore, Russia-Pakistan relations have evolved in recent years with increased defence cooperation, joint military exercises, and enhanced economic ties. Russia has expressed interest in expanding its economic engagement with Pakistan, including investments in energy and infrastructure projects. These developments indicate Russia's intention to deepen its ties with Pakistan while maintaining its partnership with India ([Younus, 2018](#)). The complex South Asian geopolitical landscape shaped by India-Pakistan relations and Russia's relationship with India has implications for Russia-Pakistan ties. The long-lasting India-Pakistan conflict and close association between India and Russia might have limited the intensity of Russia and Pakistan relations; however, Russia recognizing the strategic importance of Pakistan has sought to balance its relations in the region. The dynamics of these

relationships require careful navigation to maintain stability and promote cooperation among all the involved parties.

The Afghanistan Factor

The crucial role of Afghanistan in shaping Russia-Pakistan relations is undeniable, for stability and peace in Afghanistan influence the security concerns of both states and the dynamics of the entire region. Actively involved in the Afghan peace process, Russia and Pakistan always aimed to bring an end to the protracted conflict and establish a stable and inclusive government in Afghanistan ([Mian, 2015](#)). Their engagement in the peace process reflects their shared interests in regional stability, counter-terrorism, and prevention of the spillover of violence and extremism across borders.

Russia's involvement in the Afghan peace process stems from its concerns about the potential threats that emanate from Afghanistan. Russia has experienced the repercussions of instability in Afghanistan like drug trafficking, terrorism, and the spread of extremist ideologies. As a result, Russia resorted to diplomatic efforts, hosting talks and conferences, and acting as a mediator to facilitate dialogue between the Afghan government, Taliban, and other regional stakeholders ([Salman, 2021](#)). Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process is crucial due to its geographical proximity and historical ties with Afghanistan. Cross-border militant activities and the influx of Afghan refugees strained and undermined its security infrastructure and national cohesion. Pakistan effectively facilitated peace talks and supported reconciliation efforts among Afghan factions. Its support for the peace process is driven by the desire to stabilize its western border and create

conditions for regional peace and economic integration.

Russia and Pakistan have found common ground in their approach to the Afghan peace process. Each advocate for an inclusive political settlement involving all Afghan factions to ensure the rights and representation of all segments of Afghan society. Both supported dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban, recognizing the importance of a negotiated settlement to achieve lasting peace ([Siddiqi, 2021](#)). Furthermore, both Russia and Pakistan share concerns about the potential spillover effects of the Afghan conflict on their states. They aim to prevent the infiltration of extremist groups into their countries and mitigate the risks of terrorism and instability. Enhanced cooperation in intelligence sharing, border management, and counterterrorism efforts have been a significant aspect of their engagement in the Afghan peace process.

Despite the convergence of interests at some points regarding Afghanistan, Russia and Pakistan have equally significant divergent priorities and relationships with different Afghan factions. Russia has maintained contacts with different Afghan actors, including the Taliban, for promoting a comprehensive political settlement. Pakistan, on the other hand, having historically close ties with certain Afghan factions facilitated dialogue and negotiations ([Gul, 2018](#)). Russia and Pakistan's engagement in the Afghan peace process reflect their mutual concerns regarding maintaining security, countering terrorism, and preventing the spillover of instability. Their approaches may differ to some extent; however, they have found common ground in supporting an inclusive political settlement and actualising a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

The Chinese Factor

China's influence on Russia-Pakistan relations is significant. Given its close relationships with both countries and their involvement in China-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's growing presence in the region shapes the dynamics of the Russia-Pakistan relationship in multiple ways ([Chia & Haiqi, 2021](#)). Firstly, China's deepening engagement with both Russia and Pakistan has created new avenues for trilateral cooperation. China's Belt and Road Initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and promoting economic integration has provided opportunities for Russia, Pakistan, and China to collaborate on infrastructure projects and trade corridors. This increased economic interaction and the potential for closer regional integration.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI, has fostered economic ties between China and Pakistan, encompassing infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and industrial collaboration ([Ahmed, 2010](#)). Recognizing the potential benefits of connectivity and economic integration in the region, Russia has also expressed interest in participating in CPEC-related projects. Secondly, China's close relations with both Russia and Pakistan have created a geopolitical balancing act. While Russia and Pakistan historically had divergent interests and regional alignments, China's involvement has helped bridge some of the gaps with a platform for trilateral cooperation. China's neutrality and its ability to maintain robust relationships with both countries have facilitated dialogue and cooperation among all parties.

Furthermore, China's involvement in the region has provided incentives for

Russia and Pakistan to find areas of convergence and collaboration. Both countries recognize the economic opportunities presented by China's investment and infrastructure initiatives as well as the potential for enhanced regional connectivity (Syed, 2014). This has created a common ground for Russia and Pakistan to explore areas of cooperation and overcome historical barriers. However, China's involvement provided opportunities for trilateral cooperation, it has also introduced complexities and challenges. As China's influence expands, there may be areas where the interests of Russia and Pakistan diverge from or overlap with China's own strategic objectives. Balancing these competing interests will require careful diplomacy and a nuanced approach by all the involved parties.

China's influence on Russia-Pakistan relations is significant, primarily driven by its close relationships with both countries and its involvement in China-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Paracha, 2015). China's economic engagement, infrastructure projects, and geopolitical balancing act have influenced the dynamics between Russia and Pakistan, creating opportunities for collaboration and convergence. However, managing the complexities arising from China's involvement will be crucial for maintaining a balanced and sustainable trilateral relationship.

Thematic Areas of Russia-Pakistan Cooperation

Defense and Security

Russia and Pakistan have made notable progress in defence and security cooperation, signalling the deepening of their bilateral ties. This section underlines the defence agreements between the two

countries, including arms sales, and joint military exercises, and analyzes its implications for regional security. In recent years, Russia and Pakistan have signed several defence agreements, paving the way for enhanced cooperation in military affairs. These agreements encompass a wide range of areas including arms sales, defence technology transfer, and joint military exercises. Russia has emerged as a significant supplier of defence equipment to Pakistan. Notably, in 2014, Russia lifted its arms embargo on Pakistan and initiated its defence trade with it. Since then, several major arms deals are concluded between the two countries (Khan, 2019). Russia has supplied Pakistan with various means and mechanisms of defence, including helicopters, tanks, and air defence. These arms sales have bolstered Pakistan's defence capabilities and contributed to modernizing its armed forces. In addition to arms sales, Russia has also engaged in defence technology transfer to Pakistan. It includes the manufacturing and assembly of Russian military equipment in Pakistan, facilitating the localization of defence production and having the potential to strengthen Pakistan's defence industry.

Russia and Pakistan have conducted joint military exercises, a platform for enhancing interoperability, sharing best practices, and building trust between their respective armed forces. Notable joint exercises include the "Friendship" series, which began in 2016 (Mohan, 2021). These exercises have covered various domains like counterterrorism operations, mountain warfare, and Special Forces training. Joint military exercises contribute to mutual learning and cooperation in defence strategies and tactics. The implications of defence and security cooperation between Russia and Pakistan extend beyond bilateral

relations. This collaboration has regional security implications, particularly in the context of South Asia and Afghanistan.

Regional Security

Enhanced defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan will contribute to regional security. Both countries share concerns about terrorism, extremism, and Afghanistan's stability. By collaborating in defence and security matters, Russia and Pakistan aim to address these common challenges. Joint efforts in counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and border management can help in countering transnational threats and preventing the spillover of violence across borders ([Abbasi, 2020](#)). Moreover, their joint involvement in the Afghan peace process demonstrates their commitment to regional stability and search for a peaceful resolution to the Afghan conflict. However, it is essential to acknowledge that defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan may also raise concerns among other regional actors. Given the historical rivalry between India and Pakistan, India may view Russia's defence cooperation with Pakistan as detrimental to its own security interests. Balancing these competing interests and managing potential tensions is a delicate task for Russia, for it seeks to maintain its partnerships with both India and Pakistan.

Defence and security cooperation between Russia and Pakistan has progressed significantly in recent years. Arms sales, defence technology transfer, and joint military exercises have strengthened their bilateral ties ([Syed, 2014](#)). This collaboration has implications for regional security as both countries seek to address common challenges, promote stability, and contribute to the resolution of the Afghan conflict. Managing the

perceptions and concerns of other regional actors, particularly India, will be crucial in maintaining balance and sustaining the positive momentum in defence cooperation between Russia and Pakistan.

Economic and Trade Relations

Russia and Pakistan have recognized the potential for increased economic cooperation and have taken steps to enhance their bilateral trade relations. This section will explore the bilateral trade agreements between the two countries, the prospects for further economic cooperation, and the potential for integrating Pakistan into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia and Pakistan have signed several bilateral trade agreements to promote economic ties and facilitate trade between the two countries. These agreements aim to reduce trade barriers, enhance investment protection, and foster cooperation in various sectors ([Chia & Haiqi, 2021](#)). They provide a framework for trade facilitation, tariff reductions, and the promotion of investment and joint ventures.

Despite the positive trajectory, the current volume of trade between Russia and Pakistan is still relatively modest. Efforts are being made to increase trade volumes and diversify the trade composition. Mainly, the trade relationship is centred on commodities such as cotton, rice, fruits, and petroleum products. However, there is untapped potential for expanding trade in sectors such as textiles, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products. Both countries have expressed the desire to enhance economic cooperation and diversify their trade relations. There is a focus on exploring new opportunities, such as collaboration in energy projects, infrastructure development, and joint ventures in the manufacturing and technology sectors.

Investment forums and business delegations have been organized to promote economic exchanges and create awareness of investment opportunities in both countries. The possibility of integrating Pakistan into the EAEU, a regional economic bloc comprising Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, has been discussed ([Rashid & Tahir, 2021](#)). The EAEU aims to promote economic integration, harmonize trade policies, and create a common market. While there have been discussions regarding a free trade agreement between Pakistan and the EAEU, formal integration remains a complex process with various economic, legal, and logistical challenges.

Integration into the EAEU could potentially provide Pakistan with greater access to the Eurasian market, increased trade opportunities, and harmonized trade regulations. It could also facilitate the movement of goods, services, and capital between Pakistan and EAEU member states. However, challenges such as tariff harmonization, alignment of trade policies, and addressing non-tariff barriers would need to be addressed for successful integration. Overall, there is a shared commitment between Russia and Pakistan to strengthen economic cooperation and expand bilateral trade. Efforts are being made to diversify trade, enhance investment, and explore new avenues of economic collaboration ([Jalal, 1997](#)). While the integration of Pakistan into the EAEU offers potential benefits, it requires careful consideration of the challenges and implications involved. Continued dialogue, cooperation, and implementation of trade agreements will be essential to realizing the full economic potential of the Russia-Pakistan relationship.

Energy Cooperation: Discuss Joint Energy Projects, Particularly those Related to the North-South Gas Pipeline

Russia and Pakistan have been engaged in energy cooperation with a particular focus on joint energy projects. One significant project of cooperation is the North-South gas pipeline. This section will discuss the North-South gas pipeline project and highlight its importance in the energy cooperation between Russia and Pakistan. The North-South gas pipeline is a proposed project aiming to connect liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Karachi, Pakistan's southern port city, with gas fields in Russia. The pipeline would span approximately 1,100 kilometres, crossing through Pakistan to deliver natural gas to various parts of the country ([Gul, 2018](#)). This project holds great significance for both Russia and Pakistan due to its potential to address Pakistan's energy needs and contribute to regional energy security. For Pakistan, the North-South gas pipeline is viewed as a means to diversify its energy sources and reduce dependence on traditional energy providers. Pakistan has been grappling with energy shortages and has been actively seeking solutions to meet its growing energy demands. The project would provide a reliable supply of natural gas, aiding in the country's energy sector development and economic growth.

Russia, as a major natural gas producer, has a vested interest in exporting its energy resources to new markets. The North-South gas pipeline project allows Russia to tap into Pakistan's energy market and strengthen its presence in South Asia. ([Kaushiki, 2019](#)) It also aligns with Russia's broader objective of expanding its energy cooperation and diversifying its customer base. The North-

South gas pipeline project offers mutual benefits to both countries. Pakistan would gain access to a stable supply of natural gas, contributing to its energy security and fostering economic development. Meanwhile, Russia would have a new market for its natural gas exports, further diversifying its energy trade and enhancing its regional influence.

The project also has the potential to contribute to regional energy connectivity. Pakistan's strategic location as a transit hub allows the possibility of extending the pipeline to other countries in the region, such as India and Iran, creating an interconnected energy network. Such connectivity could foster regional cooperation, enhance energy trade, and promote stability in the wider region ([Khan, 2019](#)). However, it is important to note that the implementation of the North-South gas pipeline project faces certain challenges. These challenges include securing financing for the project, addressing technical and logistical issues, and navigating through geopolitical complexities. The successful completion of the project would require close collaboration between the governments of Russia and Pakistan, along with the involvement of relevant stakeholders.

The North-South gas pipeline project represents a significant joint energy project between Russia and Pakistan. The project has the potential to address Pakistan's energy needs, diversify energy sources, and enhance regional energy security. It also offers Russia an opportunity to expand its energy trade and strengthen its presence in South Asia ([Janjua, 2021](#)). While challenges exist, the successful implementation of the project would bring mutual benefits and contribute to regional energy connectivity and cooperation.

Challenges and Prospects for Future Cooperation

While the Russia-Pakistan relationship has shown positive developments, there are challenges that need to be addressed for further deepening of cooperation. This section will discuss some of these challenges and then analyze potential avenues for future cooperation, including technology, climate change, and counter-terrorism.

Challenges

- **Historical Rivalries and Regional Dynamics:** The historical rivalry between India and Pakistan pose a challenge to Russia-Pakistan relations. Russia maintains a close strategic partnership with India, and any actions perceived as favouring Pakistan may strain its relationship with India. Navigating this delicate balance between maintaining ties with both India and Pakistan will require careful diplomacy.
- **Geopolitical Complexities:** The complex geopolitical landscape in South Asia, including the Afghan conflict and China's influence in the region, adds another layer of complexity. Balancing competing interests and managing relationships with other regional actors will require deft diplomacy.
- **Economic Constraints:** Despite the desire for increased economic cooperation, the current volume of trade between Russia and Pakistan remains relatively modest. Economic constraints, such as infrastructure gaps, limited investment, and trade barriers, need to be addressed to

unlock the full potential of economic cooperation ([Takar, 2022](#)).

Prospects for Future Cooperation

- **Technology Cooperation:** Technology cooperation offers significant potential for future collaboration. Both Russia and Pakistan have expertise in areas such as aerospace, information technology, and nuclear energy. Joint research and development projects, technology transfers, and collaboration in emerging technologies can foster innovation and create new avenues for economic cooperation.
- **Climate Change and Environmental Cooperation:** Both countries are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and recognize the importance of addressing environmental challenges. Cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, climate resilience, and sustainable development can contribute to mitigating the effects of climate change and promoting a green economy ([Siddiq, 2021](#)).
- **Counter-terrorism and Security Cooperation:** Russia and Pakistan share concerns about terrorism and the threat of extremist groups. Enhancing cooperation in intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism strategies, and joint military exercises can

strengthen their collective efforts to combat terrorism and ensure regional security.

- **Regional Connectivity and Trade Integration:** Expanding regional connectivity, particularly through infrastructure projects, can create opportunities for increased trade and economic integration ([Rashid & Tahir, 2021](#)). Collaboration on projects such as the North-South gas pipeline, transport corridors, and cross-border initiatives can enhance regional cooperation and boost economic ties.
- **People-to-People Exchanges:** Promoting cultural exchanges, educational collaborations, and tourism can foster people-to-people contacts and deepen mutual understanding. These exchanges can contribute to building stronger ties and enhancing bilateral relations.

In summary, while there are challenges to be addressed, the prospects for future cooperation between Russia and Pakistan are promising ([Subohi, 2018](#)). Avenues such as technical cooperation, climate change, counter-terrorism, regional connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges offer opportunities for enhanced collaboration. By addressing challenges, fostering trust, and leveraging mutual interests, Russia and Pakistan can further deepen their relationship and contribute to regional stability, economic development, and cooperation.

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