

# **The Moscow-Islamabad ties: A fling or a marriage?**

*By : Yasir M'alik*

Of late, Russia, Pakistan, and China have shown a willingness to establish a tripartite alliance based on mutual interests. Events of tactical significance over the past few years may translate into strategic engagements. The growing closeness in Islamabad-Moscow ties have merited interesting analyses; hence there is a need to understand this “turning of a page” between the two countries.

## **An overview**

The contemporary global politics has been witnessing the phenomenal transformation. China’s journey from a lingering agricultural economy to a global manufacturing giant and the resurgence of Russia has dramatically altered the global geopolitical environment. The dimensions of conflict and cooperation have been reversibly changing, spawning new opportunities and challenges in the global strategic landscape.

## **US-Russia Lethal Arms Race: Beginning of a New Cold War?**

One of the most significant developments in this context is the melting of ice

between Pakistan and its erstwhile adversary, USSR. Since the inception of Pakistan till disintegration, relations remained sour as Pakistan stayed in the US camp throughout the cold war. In the aftermath of disintegration, intermittent developments occurred to mitigate the traditional hostility between both the past antagonists. Later, periodic exchange of visits by the officials of both countries and rapidly changing dynamics of the global politics paved new avenues for the amelioration of the bilateral ties.

In the wake of bilateral interests, both Russia and Pakistan are trying to accommodate one another in multiple domains. In the previous year, Putin's govt. endorsed Pakistan's bid to acquire full membership of SCO, lifted arms embargo and offered cooperation in different dimensions of defense, infrastructure, and energy.

In the current epoch, the resurgence of Russia has challenged the unilateral position of US. South Asia has become increasingly important to seek the quest for power for both these conventional rivals. The unbridled and unusual strategic relationship between India and US has compelled Russia to seek new alliances in this region. Thus, Russia is trying to assert its influence in this region by extending its strategic and economic interests toward Pakistan.

### **Moscow's ambitions**

Consequently, Pakistan and Russia have entered into an unprecedented era of mutual interests. Russian ambitions to access the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, to consolidate its position in the South Asian region against its strategic rival US and to seek alternate arms and energy markets have pushed it to alienate with Pakistan. This not only has intensified the geostrategic importance of Pakistan but also open the doors of new opportunities for both countries.

### **Indian fears: Is Russia joining Pakistan-China in CPEC?**

In the wake of bilateral interests, both Russia and Pakistan are trying to accommodate one another in multiple domains. In the previous year, Putin's govt. endorsed Pakistan's bid to acquire full membership of SCO, lifted arms embargo and offered cooperation in different dimensions of defense, infrastructure, and energy.

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The evolving proximity between Russia and Pakistan, forgetting the bitter realities of the past, has been rapidly advancing in the arena of defense particularly. The latter year participation of Pakistani military forces in Russian war games, two-week joint military drills in Cherat (home of Pakistan's Special Forces) and Moscow's naval forces presence in multinational naval exercises AMAN 2017 happened most recently at Karachi proved to be a milestone in reinforcing the vacillating relationship.

Likewise, periodic visits by the military elites of both the countries seem to be a good omen for catalyzing the bilateral ties. Currently, talks with Moscow over purchasing of Mi-35 helicopters are in process which accounts for almost \$ 153 million, would definitely expand Pakistan's air defense capability replacing the obsolete US AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters.

### **Afghanistan: Once again becoming a U.S.-Russia Proxy Battle**

In addition, Russia has one of the world's largest gas reserves, on account of its deteriorating relations with the West, is lobbying in the quest of alternate markets. On the other side, Pakistan has a scarcity of gas resources against its growing

demand. Coupled with a number of significant bilateral developments occurred in the latter year, 2\$ billion investment by Moscow over the construction of 1300km North-South LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) pipeline from Karachi to Lahore is a notable initiative that would expect to boost the sluggish relationship and help overcome the growing energy requirements of Pakistan.

In addition, both Russia and Pakistan are desperate to establish peace in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, peace in Afghanistan is inevitable to peace in the region as well as the successful materialization of multi-billion mega project CPEC. On the other hand, Russia wants to block the drug trafficking via Central Asia and also undermine the US influence in the war-ravaged country, exerting its own influence.

Pakistan is one of the countries that has some leverage over the Taliban and Russia (once a supporter of US invasion of Afghanistan) too, had established links with the Taliban. Experts say that Russia wants to use the Taliban to increase pressure on Washington. Utilizing this opportunity, both are trying to convince Taliban and Kabul administration to resume the stalled peace process and continues to endeavor for this cause following various diplomatic initiatives. The pursuance for peace and stability in Afghanistan has unfolded new options for both to enlarge their diplomatic collaboration as well.

### **CPEC's vulnerabilities: Can Pakistan carve a way out?**

Russia also expressed her desire to be a part of Pakistan's multi-billion mega project. Russian inclusion in the CPEC would pave new avenues for trade and investment. Besides, Pakistan can also use Russian card to appease India against possible security threats to CPEC.

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With new developments in Pak-Russia relations come new concerns as well. Islamabad needs to be vigilant in pursuance of its relations with Russia by keeping the balance between maintaining relations with both the rivals. Besides burgeoning cooperation in defense, both these countries need to extend and strengthen their bilateral cooperation in the fields of trade, energy, and diplomatic sphere.

Mutual investment initiatives and joint business ventures should be inducted to forge long term strategic gains. Furthermore, people-to-people contact, cultural exchanges must be enhanced to foster the growing relationship. It must be kept in mind that behind this growing relationship, Indo-US extraordinary intimacy is a sole factor. Therefore, Pakistan should optimally use this opportunity to deepen its relations with Russia on all fronts without letting India provoke or disturb the regional balance of power.

**About the Author:**

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