



Pakistan and Russia: A New Era of Cooperation

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The growing proximity between Pakistan and Russia in recent months indicates re-alignments in the South Asian region. The recently concluded Defence Cooperation Agreement between the two countries, which is first of its kind, has been described as a 'milestone' in their relationship. The agreement provides for exchange of information on politico-military issues; cooperation for promoting international security; intensification of counter-terrorism and arms control activities; strengthening collaboration in various military fields, including education, medicine, history, topography, hydrography and culture; and sharing experiences in peacekeeping operations. Pakistan has also been offered US\$ 1bn credit line for energy projects by Russia. Before that, Russia's decision to end the embargo on the sale of weapons to Pakistan, with the sale of Mi-35 attack helicopters, reflects willingness of the two countries to come closer in a re-designed world. Is that a sign of a new era of cooperation?

The friendship between Pakistan and Russia was 'inconceivable' just a few years back, when the two countries remained in different blocs, averse to each other during the Cold War. Pakistan was part of the US-led military alliance, while the erstwhile Soviet Union extended military and other diplomatic support to India. Pakistan allowed its soil to be used by the US for surveillance on former Soviet Union and provided military training to the Mujahideen/Taliban forces fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. In opposition, the

former USSR was countering each and every move of Pakistan against India by vetoing in the UN Security Council. The symmetry was quite clear and strong. With the end of the Cold War and the geopolitical changes at the international level, bitterness between the two countries had started blurring. However, the suspicion was not completely gone and the Taliban factor loomed large in their relationship.

It is only in the last couple of years that the two countries have been able to shed their differences, and prepare a background to engage with each other. In the post-Cold War era, re-defining of national interests has definitely been a motivating factor. While the US being India's 'strategic partner' and replacing Russia as the largest arms supplier since last two years, it was natural for Russia to engage with other countries of the region. Similarly, the US-Pakistan relationship has gone down after the Abbottabad incident, which has given good reasons for Pakistan to reduce its dependence on the US. The cooperation between Pakistan and Russia is also driven by the fact that whereas Russia is moving southward for trading arms and energy products, Pakistan is already looking for a capable yet politically "manageable" trade and investment partner. Understanding Pakistan's security and energy needs, it is logical that Pakistan draws benefit from the opportunity. For Pakistan, the arms trade with Russia will help it to handle the strategic pressures from the US and also reduce India's tactical advantage.

Another important reason for Russia's interest in Pakistan is the unfolding situation in Afghanistan, which has direct implications for Russia's security. There are concerns about the prospects of Afghanistan again coming under the rule of the Taliban. If Afghanistan is stabilised, it would open the way for expanded trade between Pakistan, Central Asia and Russia. As NATO forces prepare to leave Afghanistan, Pakistan-Russia ties hold great significance for India and the South Asian region. Both the countries are also trying to increase their presence in Central Asia. Russia wants stability in its Central Asian periphery and Pakistan remains critical in managing the region. Moscow's outreach to Islamabad is an attempt to have leverage on the regional dynamics.

Since New Delhi shares special relationship with Moscow, Russia-Pakistan coming together has created some uneasiness. However, experts in Moscow say that Russia's defence agreement with Pakistan will not be at the cost of India. In India too, experts opine that Russia is unlikely to do anything to jeopardize its enormous defence business with India. Similarly, Moscow can never substitute Washington as far as aid and defence support to Pakistan is concerned. It is severely constrained in what it can do for Pakistan.

Pakistan-Russia relations have been evolving in the positive direction during recent months. There is vast potential for the growth of bilateral cooperation between the two countries 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 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, this newly emerging friendship between the two countries is likely to be closely watched by New Delhi and Washington.

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