

Russia Warming up to Pakistan

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The impending withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014 has seen increased efforts being made by Russia and China to gain influence in the region. As a part of their strategy to secure its interests in Central Asia, Russia has been attempting to foster a relationship with Pakistan. Although, the first visit by any Russian President to Pakistan seems to have been shelved for the time being, the upturn in Russia-Pakistan ties from next-to-nothing is one of the more remarkable shifts playing out in South Asia since the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan. On the other hand, the relationship between India and Russia continues to remain strong, largely underpinned by enduring military sales to New Delhi.

Beginning 2008, Zardari met Putin's predecessor Dmitry Medvedev six times on the margins of regional and global conferences culminating in a state visit in May 2011. His foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar was in Moscow in February trying to woo Russian investment in Pakistan's crippled energy sector and in May, Putin dispatched his point man on Afghanistan Ambassador Zamir Kabulov to Islamabad to lay the ground for the state visit.¹ Even more critically, the commander of Russia's ground forces, Col-Gen Alexander Postnikov, was in Islamabad last year and according to Pakistani media reports discussed the possibility of defence ties including joint military exercises and weapons sales.² It's not lost on anyone that the steady rapprochement with Moscow follows a spectacular, and according to many, an irreversible deterioration in Pakistan's ties with the United States, long its benefactor.

Notwithstanding the resumption of NATO's ground lines of communication to Afghanistan through Pakistan, the relationship between the United States and Pakistan stands all but broken, and so much bitterness has crept into it that it is hard to imagine them coming together again. Washington says it cannot deal with a so-called partner and a designated non NATO major ally who pockets billions of dollars in assistance while giving sanctuary to militants attacking U.S. forces in Afghanistan as well as those plotting attacks on U.S. interests worldwide. Pakistan on the other hand says America has been an unfaithful ally, building a strategic relationship with rival India including virtually recognising it as the world's sixth nuclear weapon state while tightening the squeeze on Pakistan and demanding that it fight America's war on Islamist militancy in the region at great cost, both in terms of blood and treasure. Worse, the United States has dropped initial reservations and is allowing, indeed even encouraging a greater Indian role to help stabilise Afghanistan, which Pakistan sees as part of its strategic depth against continent-size India.

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Indeed India, Afghanistan and the United States this spring began a trilateral dialogue to jointly deal with the challenge Afghanistan will face once the bulk of foreign troops leave, just over two years away. For India to be involved in any endgame in Afghanistan, is anathema to Pakistan and stokes its worst fear of encirclement, and even dismemberment as happened to East Pakistan in 1971.

As its relationship with the United States unravels, Pakistan has cultivated ever closer ties with "all-weather" friend China, and now as the relationship between China and Russia warms, it makes sense at least to the civilian leaders in Islamabad to reach out to Moscow. Pakistan's future is in the region, and its interests lie in building strong political and economic ties with its neighbours and those in the near abroad - Russia is geographically closer to it than India - rather than be distant America's foot soldier. Indeed three of the BRICs are in Pakistan's neighbourhood, and it is up to it to exploit the opportunities these fast-growing economies offer to pull itself back from economic collapse.

Russia, for its part, appears to have figured out that so dire are Pakistan's energy requirements that it must first address this vulnerability before it can attain any degree of strategic autonomy and pull out of America's orbit. Moscow has offered its support for a string of big-ticket energy projects including the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline and

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officials are racing to put in place a set of agreements that the two sides can reach during Putin's³ visit.

The \$7.5 billion project will bring 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day (bcfd) from Turkmenistan's gas fields to Multan in central Pakistan and will end in the northwestern Indian town of Fazilka. Originally scheduled to be completed by 2013-14, the landmark deal was signed by Zardari, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Indian Petroleum Minister Murli Deora, and President of the Asian Development Bank Haruhiko Kuroda in Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan, in 2010. But the instability in the region has kept the project frozen.

Russia has said it is interested in participating in TAPI as also in the even more controversial Iran-Pakistan project which envisages bringing gas from Iran to Pakistan. India has dropped out of the project, which many see as a result of U.S. pressure. Russia's Gazprom may offer part financing of the pipeline that the Pakistanis are determined to build despite the tightening U.S. sanctions on Iran. At a joint working group meeting this summer, the Russian authorities also offered \$500 million for the World bank-backed Central Asia South Asia electricity import project, which would bring electricity from Central Asian states. Under the project floated in 2006, 1,000 to 1,300 megawatts of surplus electricity will be imported from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Pakistani and Russian officials are also discussing the possibility of Russian assistance to expand the capacity of Pakistan Steel Mills, reviving Moscow's involvement in the sector that began with Soviet technical assistance for a plant in Karachi in the early 1970s.

China, arguably Pakistan's closest ally now, is already helping develop Pakistan's nuclear energy programme- the other big plank in its strategic autonomy- committing to build two more reactors, despite the international community's reservations about Pakistan's rapid build-up of nuclear weapons and its proliferation record.

For Russia, clearly, Pakistan is the key to tackling the tangled mess in the region as NATO prepares to leave Afghanistan. It sees itself as the guardian angel of the Central Asian Republics (CAR) and has repeatedly expressed concern about the arc of instability radiating out from the Afghanistan-Pakistan belt that has only gotten worse since the U.S. invasion and feeds its own insurgencies as well trafficking in drugs. Almost one fourth of the drugs produced in Afghanistan flows to Russia.

With a drastic demographic fall and with nearly 3 million drug addicts, Russia today cannot afford to continue this situation for long. It is even more concerned about nuclear proliferation and had raised the alarm about the dangers emanating from Pakistan, well before the activities of A.Q.Khan burst into the open⁴.

Stability

Stabilising Pakistan, - a nuclear power with a population bigger than Russia's - then, is the first step toward stabilising Afghanistan and then the countries of Central Asia, at its doorstep. Many of the Islamist militants who commit violent acts in Central Asia are based in Pakistan, and are linked to Russia's jihadi problems in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.

At the June 2009 Shanghai Cooperation summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, then President Medvedev declared that "nests of terror" in Pakistan had to be eliminated as a priority. It's the same call from the Chinese, who have made it clear that the presence of militants of all hues in the Pakistani northwest is of deep concern to them. Beijing has stood firmly in Pakistan's corner but it is obvious that even a relationship as secure as theirs has its limit as long as Pakistan is seen as a sanctuary for Islamist fundamentalism and where the state has used some of these forces as an instrument of foreign policy.

Putin has publicly endorsed Pakistan's bid to gain full membership to the SCO but it also wants India in the grouping which looks set to play a bigger role in the affairs of the region including Afghanistan as the West retreats. China, which has held the organisation's rotating presidency since Aug 2011, has to take a call on the two candidatures.

From Russia's standpoint, getting Pakistan into the grouping - which it at one stage likened to a regional NATO - would help forge a compact against separatism, extremism and militancy. Together with China which similarly prizes stability above everything else, it can work to temper Pakistan's irredentist tendencies in ways the Americans could not do because they became such a hated power. Unlike the United States, the approach would likely be low key which is how the Chinese have operated in Pakistan.

In return Russia appears ready to offer Pakistan the full spectrum of its industrial and technological power to rebuild the South Asian nation's industrial base - again something that the Pakistanis say billions of dollars of U.S. aid failed to do. Putin in fact has been pushing hard for setting up a "energy club" within the SCO comprising Russia, Iran and the central Asia republics as the producers and China, India and Pakistan as the big consumers. A powerful club such as

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that can well influence energy markets, and ultimately put further distance between Pakistan and the West.⁵

The challenge for Moscow will be to upgrade its ties with Pakistan while maintaining a close relationship with India. Putin has said he sees ties with India are a priority and its hard to see either countries giving up on a relationship that has benefited both countries. Russia remains the top arms weapons seller to India even though the West especially Israel is fast making inroads.

Indo-Russian cooperation in the military technical cooperation sphere has been transformed from a simple buyer-seller framework to one involving joint R&D, joint production and marketing of advanced defence technologies and systems. The BrahMos missile system is an example of this type of cooperation. Joint development of the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) and the Multi Transport Aircraft (MTA), as well as the licensed production in India of SU-30 aircraft and T-90 tanks, are other examples of flagship cooperation programs that are presently underway in this area.⁶

In April this year, a Russian-built nuclear-powered submarine was inducted into the Indian navy, the only one in the fleet until the indigenously built Arihant is ready, expected at the end of the year. A nuclear-powered vessel that can stay submerged for up to three months is a force multiplier for any navy, allowing it to operate for long and deeper levels. Russia is also building the Kudankulam nuclear power plant although it has been delayed by protests. Russia recognises India as a country with advanced nuclear technology and impeccable track record in non-proliferation. It supports India's intention to seek full membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group and other multilateral export control regimes like the MTCR and Wassenaar Arrangements. Ties such as these are likely to remain solid even as Moscow reaches out to Pakistan. More than Russia, it will depend on the Pakistanis how far they are ready to take this entente forward.

For all its disenchantment with the United States, it's not yet clear whether the Pakistani military, the final arbiter of foreign and security policies has warmed to the idea of a Russian embrace. They seem too occupied dealing with the unraveling relationship with the United States while locked in a discreet power struggle with the civilian leadership at home with an eye on upcoming national elections. They also have shown few signs of cutting ties to the militant groups they spawned which will remain a stumbling block to a deeper relationship with Russia or even China, ultimately.

Indeed if the Saudis can relent and deport Abu Jundal wanted by the Indians for involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks despite the protestations of Pakistan who said he was a holding a Pakistani passport, then it is clear that the options for Pakistan are rapidly closing. It could change course and develop close cooperative relationships with Russia, China and India and fulfill the promise of its creation as a modern Islamic state, or continue deeper down a conflicted path, alternating between a superpower's proxy and a home for the world's terrorists.

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Notes

1. Author, "Beneath the radar, a Russia-Pakistan entente takes shape", *Reuters*, March 8, 2012 <http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2012/03/08/beneath-the-radar-a-russia-pakistan-entente-takes-shape/>, accessed on August 10, 2012
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3. Zafar Bhutta, Putin coming in Sept: Pakistan, Russia likely to strike deals for energy projects, *Express Tribune*, July 25, 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/412556/putin-coming-in-sept-pakistan-russia-likely-to-strike-deals-for-energy-projects/>, accessed on August 10, 2012.
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5. M.K.Bhadrakumar, A Russia House on the Indian Ocean, *Asia Times*, June 30, 2012 http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/NF30Ag02.html, accessed August 13, 2012.
6. India-Russia Relations, *Ministry of External Affairs*, January 2012 <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=50044518>, accessed on August 13, 2012.