
From Estrangement to Engagement: Pakistan–Russia Cooperation in Regional Connectivity and Economic Integration

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Abstract

Historically, Pakistan–Russia relations have been shaped by strategic estrangement rooted in Cold War alignments and regional rivalries. In recent years, however, bilateral engagement has increased, particularly in the domains of regional connectivity and economic cooperation. This study examines this shift through a complex interdependence theory, arguing that both states are prioritizing economic pragmatism alongside strategic interests within an evolving multipolar regional order. Drawing on qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and secondary literature, the study examines cooperation in energy infrastructure, trade facilitation, and transport connectivity linking South Asia, Central Asia, and Eurasia. The findings indicate that connectivity initiatives serve as instruments for reducing economic vulnerabilities, diversifying partnerships, and enhancing mutual interdependence, even in the presence of enduring geopolitical constraints. The article concludes that Pakistan–Russia cooperation reflects a gradual transition from historically constrained relations towards a pragmatic engagement driven by geoeconomics considerations rather than ideological alignment, contributing to broader patterns of regional economic integration.

Keyword: Pakistan, Russia, Complex Interdependence, Regional Connectivity, Eurasian Regionalism, Multi-Polarity

Introduction

Historically, relations of the both countries have been heavily influenced by the Cold War (Abbas, 2019). Pakistan's had close ties with the United States of America (USA) and played its role in the USA led efforts to contain the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) aggression in Asia which resulted in decades of bad relations. In 1979, the war due USSR invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's role in assisting Afghan mujahedeen, with the support of the USA, further entrench the tensions. For many years, Pakistan and Russia had limited diplomatic, trade and military interactions, with an ideological and geopolitical gap between them. However, in the post-Cold War environment the world has changed due to disintegration of USSR in 1991. The rise of the Russian Federation and a shift in Pakistan's foreign policy due to internal and external matters have created new avenues for engagement. Realising the advantages of cooperative efforts, both countries have started to improve their relations (Naqvi, 2017). In the current era, both countries

have more cooperative relationship, especially in areas of regional connectivity, economic integration and energy security (Khashkhanov, 2015). The Russia-Pakistan rapprochement is not only important for the two nations, but also for the Asia, in terms of the changing geopolitical balances, energy security and strategic priorities. This research explored the shift from isolation to engagement between Pakistan and Russia, with an emphasis on their cooperation in regional integration, economic connectivity, energy security and the opportunities and challenges facing this new relationship.

Historical Background of Estrangement

The geopolitical environment of the Cold War is the historical backdrop of the estrangement between Pakistan and Russia. After its independence in 1947, Pakistan formed a close alliance with the West, especially the USA to contain USSR's communism in the world. That is why, Pakistan became member of Western blocs such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), to counter Soviet expansionism in Asia. In this era, the USSR was more suspicious of Western encroachment in its "backyard" of Central Asia, therefore, these organizations created threat for it. The ideological difference between both countries also created some problems as Pakistan got independence on the name of Islam and the USSR follow atheism of the Marxist-Leninist USSR. Pakistan's relationship with USSR further soured by the later intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan played a pivotal role in the US-led support for the Afghan mujahedeen in their fight against the Soviet Red Army. Pakistan offered military assistance and base camp to prepare mujahedeen for the Afghan resistance which further antagonized the Soviet Union. Historically, Pakistan had a stance that USSR had expansionist policies which were solidified by the Soviets' intervention in Afghanistan, therefore, it became almost impossible for the two states to conduct diplomatic relations. Therefore, mostly in of the Cold War, Pakistan and the Soviet Union were estranged, with little to no diplomatic, commerce or military interactions. This period of isolation persisted for decades with little to no political, economic, or military interactions. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new chapter in Pakistan-Soviet relations began. The Cold War's conclusion marked a new era, in which both Russia and Pakistan re-evaluated their foreign policies and looked for ways to engage once again.

Regional Security Complex Theory

The theory is developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in late 1970s to explain the growing connectedness and interdependence in the world. The theory challenged the realism theory which views state as a primary actor in decision making on world stage and always prioritize military power to gain interest in the world. Main points of the theory are given below:

1. Multiple level of interaction: State-to-state interaction, trans governmental relations like relations between agencies without government oversight and transnational relations like relations between non state actors
2. Absence of Hierarchy among Issues: It is not compulsory that national security always take the priority but global agenda is consistently shifting where multiple issues are interlinked. For example, trade agreement is linked to environment problem, where leaders had to negotiate on multiple things at the same time.
3. Less Role of Military: In the current world, military force has become less reliable and useful tool to solve problems of the state. In this interconnected world, the economic cost of war is too high for a state bear therefore states prioritize cooperation over military conflict.

The Transition to Engagement

The post-Cold War's era marked a shift in global politics when the world was passing through hyper globalization phase which presented an opportunity for Pakistan and Russia to recalibrate their foreign policies. Russia was weakened by the Soviet collapse and was looking to re-establish its position in the world. Meanwhile, Pakistan began to distance itself from its excessive dependence on the United States, especially as the USA turned its attention away from South Asia after the Cold War. In this new environment of diplomacy, Russia and Pakistan began to create complex interdependence in areas of mutual interest like economic, regional and security issues (Abbas, 2019). A key factor in this development was the changing geopolitical landscape in Central Asia in which Russia and Pakistan shared a keen interest. After the USSR collapse, the newly independent Central Asian republics (CARs) became a key priority for Russia's foreign policy. Russia's historical legacy and desire to maintain its influence in the CARs push it to look towards its regional partners, including Pakistan, which is well-positioned to play a significant role in the region. In return, Pakistan saw Russia as a potential partner in improving connectivity and energy security in the region. Pakistan's diminishing dependence on the USA, especially in post-Cold War and with the evolving geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and South Asia, also opened the door for Russia to engage with Pakistan. Pakistan is now open to engage with Russia, its former Cold War rival because it is facing pressure to diversify its foreign policy. The convergence of Pakistan's and Russia's geopolitical and economic interests provided the basis for a stronger relationship in the post-Cold War period.

Energy Cooperation and Regional Connectivity

Energy security is a crucial aspect of Pakistan-Russia cooperation. Pakistan is facing huge energy crises and want to diversify its energy portfolio, and Russia as a major energy producer can help to deal this issue. Pakistan is facing increase in energy demand because of its rising population, industrial expansion and technological advancement so energy projects are a key element of the Pakistan-Russia partnership. Pakistan's energy demands can be addressed by the abundance of natural gas and oil resources in Russia because it has world's largest natural gas reserves and 5th largest oil reserves. In this context, trade of oil and gas is main area of their cooperation and both are working on the projects that would help Pakistan to import Russian oil and gas (Yousaf, 2022). This includes the development of pipelines to carry Russian natural gas to Pakistan to help resolve Pakistan's energy crisis. Recently, Pakistan and Russia signed an agreement to make offshore gas and oil exploration besides laying a pipeline to supply gas from Middle East resources through sea link. Russia also signed an agreement with Pakistan to upgrade its refineries and expand processing facilities.

These pipelines are linking Russia's energy-rich regions with the South Asian energy market and these are vital for Pakistan's energy security but also provide significant opportunity for Russia to increase its energy exports to South Asia and the Middle East (Reuters, 2024).

Other than cooperation in energy security, connectivity is another key focus of the bilateral partnership. Pakistan's is located on geo-strategic and geographical position; therefore, it is vital for connecting Central Asia to the Indian Ocean for trade and energy exports. Russia understands the value of Pakistan's strategic location, therefore, is keen to join efforts to build roads and railways to improve regional connectivity between Central Asia, Pakistan, and other regions. Such infrastructure development has the potential to improve regional trade and provide new opportunities for Russia and Pakistan to integrate themselves in the regional economy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a significant infrastructure project linking China to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, is also at the heart of this relationship. Although Russia is not officially part of CPEC but it has shown interest to join the projects which help to increase cooperation energy sector and infrastructure (Ahmed et al., 2023). In case Russia joined CPEC project, it will

not only help the region to improve connectivity but Russia would also get benefits of having access to the South Asian market. According to Pakistan's central bank data, bilateral trade between Russia and Pakistan has rose more than 100 percent and reached to \$1.81 billion from July 2023 to June 2024 and overall bilateral trade has increased 50 percent in last five years.

Defence Cooperation and Security Collaboration

Along with energy and trade cooperation, both countries are also increasing their cooperation in defence. Although both countries had limited defence engagement during the Cold War but in recent time, both nations are improving their military cooperation. They face common security challenges in the region like terrorism and extremism which led to a greater collaboration on defence. Pakistan is facing security issues like terrorism and border disputes with powerful India therefore Pakistan is trying to import defence equipment from Russia to create balance of power. On the other hand, Russia is providing Pakistan a chance to upgrade its military equipment by importing state-of-the-art defence technologies (Naqvi, 2017). As Russia is major defence power in the world and have expertise in conventional weapon like tanks and jets and non-conventional weapons like nuclear, biological and cyber weapon, therefore it can be very helpful for Pakistan to improve its military capabilities.

Russia is providing military hardware to Pakistan like helicopters, air defence systems and advanced fighter aircraft. Both have also undertaken joint military training and intelligence sharing exercises as part of their defence cooperation, enhancing the security alliance between the countries. Another factor that has increased Pak-Russia collaborating on security is the common threat from terrorism in the region especially in Afghanistan. Both states are concerned about the rise of extremist ideologies in Afghanistan which is providing safe haven to terror groups that create problems for Russia and Pakistan. Through security cooperation, Pakistan and Russia can eliminate these threats which can help to promote regional stability.

Multilateral Organizations and Their Role

In recent years, multilateral organizations are playing significant role in shaping the foreign policy, economic and security landscape of nations. The multilateral organizations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are working to promote peace, stability, economic development and regional integration (Mehmood et al., 2024). As Pakistan and Russia deepen their bilateral engagement, their participation in multilateral organizations also strengthens their joint commitment to regional and global peace and integration. Both countries are member of different organization but working very closely under SCO, a political, economic and security organization founded in 2001 to enhance cooperation in Eurasia to deal issues like terrorism, drug smuggling and economic growth. Russia is one of founding members of the SCO and Pakistan joined in 2017 but this organization provided a platform for both countries to work together on issues of mutual concern like regional security and economic cooperation. The common regional stability concern for both countries is situation in Afghanistan for which SCO is offering discussion, cooperation on counter-terrorism and peace-building initiatives (Khan, 2020). The organization is providing both countries a platform to enhance security cooperation, exchange information to combat threats like extremism, organized crime, and the spread of terrorism in the region. The SCO is also providing both countries an opportunity for economic cooperation, investment, trade and infrastructure partnership under its regional economic programs.

Both countries are strengthening economic partnerships by creating connectivity to improve trade connections and energy security for which SCO is playing huge part. Pakistan wants to improve its tumbling economy by increasing regional development by improving connectivity to Central Asia and Russia want to access South Asia markets of almost 2 billion people. Other than SCO,

international organizations like the UN and WTO are playing a vital role in Pakistan-Russia relations. As the UN platform helps to deal global challenges like climate change, human rights, peacekeeping and international conflict. Pakistan and Russia are also member of UN therefore, both are cooperating on multiple global issues like terrorism, humanitarian aid and promoting reforms in global governance.

Pakistan and Russia are also cooperating under WTO which helps to strengthen economic and trade relations through rules-based global trading system. Under the organization, both countries are cooperating to resolve trade and tariff related disputes to increase the movement of goods and services (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2025). Furthermore, both nations are seeking to establish joint ventures to increase supply chain efficiencies and foster a stronger commercial relationship to benefit their respective economies and Eurasian region. Participation in these international forums offers Russia and Pakistan the chance to influence regional and global policies which can help to deepen their diplomatic relations and promote economic development. Through collaborative efforts in international forums, both countries support a more interconnected and peaceful global community while promoting their common interests in security, trade and regional connectivity.

The Role of Technology and Innovation in Future Cooperation

In increasingly interconnected world, technology and innovation are becoming a key part of global cooperation. In Pakistan and Russia, technological partnerships are increasingly important in tackling issues of energy security, regional stability and economic development. There is a difference between size, scale, technological and industrial capacity of both countries. Pakistan has smaller industrial base, size, limited resources, production and advancement. On the other hand, Russia is world's largest industrial base, abundant natural resources, advance and capable industrial base. The differences in capabilities provide a huge potential for collaboration on projects like energy, information technology (IT), defence and space. Both countries can increase cooperation, strengthen their strategic partnership and foster economic growth by collaborating in innovation like energy technology. Pakistan faces energy challenges, including shortages, increasing demand, and poor infrastructure and Russia's technological capabilities in energy extraction, nuclear energy and gas infrastructure development can assist Pakistan in addressing these challenges. Both countries can also collaborate in production of renewable energy to achieve energy efficiency and this will also help Russia to increase its energy footprint in South Asia (Ahmed & Iqbal, 2018). Moreover, space and satellite communication technologies are other areas where Pakistan can benefit from Russia's rich legacy of space exploration, technological development, satellite communication, remote sensing technologies and space stations. This collaboration will help both countries to upgrade their communication infrastructure, support scientific research and strengthen national security. This collaboration can lead to regional development as well especially in agriculture and disaster response by using satellite technology for monitoring crops, predicting climate change and managing resources.

Another area for technology collaboration among both countries is IT and digital economy where Russia possesses upper hand by having sophisticated IT system, cybersecurity, software development and digitalisation. Pakistan could make great progress from Russia's IT capabilities as it wishes and potential to become a hub for the global digital economy. Therefore, partnerships with Russia in these areas can help Pakistan to become technologically innovative and strong digital economy. This can boost business opportunities, enable efficient delivery of government services and build an effective governance system. Both can collaboration in defence technology, R&D initiatives, air defence, missile systems and surveillance. Both countries faced the common threat from terrorism and extremism which offers an opportunity for both countries to innovate in counter-terrorism, drone systems and intelligence sharing. Lastly, future collaboration will be in the field of sustainable development and green technology as both are grappling with

environmental issues such as resource scarcity and climate change. Through joint efforts both countries can foster economic development with environmental sustainability (Siddiqui, 2021). In summary, technology and innovation provide Pakistan and Russia with a wide range of opportunities to bolster their bilateral engagement and tackle challenges. Looking ahead, cooperation in the areas of energy, defence, IT, space and environmental sustainability can reshape the bilateral relationship and foster regional and global development. By embarking on technological partnerships, Pakistan and Russia can leverage the benefits of innovation to ensure a bright and sustainable future for their countries and the region.

Challenges to Deeper Cooperation

While Pakistan-Russia relations are improving but still there are a number of challenges with both had to navigate very carefully. The main challenge for both countries is to minimize the trust deficit which both carry from the history of Cold War. Although, both are working on this matter but still it needs a lot of efforts and commitment to bridge that suspicion of the history. The other biggest challenge for both countries is Russia's longest strategic partnership with India which is Pakistan's historical and geo-political rival. From decades, Russia is providing India military equipment and attain the status of its largest defence partner and military equipment provider. Meanwhile, Russia also provide India economic, political and diplomatic support which created security concern for Pakistan. The Russia's support to already powerful India tilted South Asia's balance of power in India's favour which is main point of concern for Pakistan and increased the trust deficit with Russia. As Russia is looking to build deeper engagement with Pakistan and wants to maintain its relationship with India then biggest challenge for Russia is to maintain its relationship with both Pakistan and India without compromising its interests.

Historically, both countries had a lot of difference therefore they do not have good economic relations and interdependence. The trade between Pakistan and Russia is much lower as compared to Russia's trade with other big players in the region because they lack physical connectivity, institutional mechanism, less private sector engagement and investment. International pressure on Russia because of international sanctions due to annexation of Crimea in 2014 and war on Ukraine in 2022 is also a big challenge for both countries to bridge.

The international geo-political environment and great power competition between the United States of America, China, and Russia is also big challenge for both countries to have good relations (Zeeshan, 2023). Pakistan's foreign policy seeks to have good relations with all big powers to achieve strategic objectives but overlapping relationship requires careful diplomatic balancing which is very big challenge. Both should ensure that deeper engagement with any power did not affect their bilateral relations (Morozov & Korybko, 2020).

The limited societal, institutional level engagement and people-to-people contact between Pakistan and Russia is also a big challenge for both countries. Both countries had limited academic, cultural exchange, tourism and research collaboration which reduce the opportunities to have deeper engagement and comprehensive partnership.

China's rising involvement in South Asia region may impact Pakistan-Russia relationship. Both countries have similar interests in regional connectivity and energy security, but China's increasing influence in Pakistan especially after China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could mean Russia gets sidelined. The Chinese economic presence in Pakistan could be a sensitive issue for Russia which needs to maintain diplomacy with both Pakistan and China. Pakistan and Russia need to carefully manage this in order to maintain friendly relations (Yaqoob & Qureshi, 2025). The second factor that has the potential to derail Pakistan-Russia relations is the relationship between India and Russia. India has long been a strategic partner of Russia, especially in the areas of security.

Looking Towards the Future

Despite the setbacks, the prospects for Pakistan-Russia cordial relations are bright. Both nations have realised the importance of collaborating on economic and strategic grounds therefore increasing cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, defence and regional integration. There is great potential for further collaboration especially in projects such as CPEC, energy cooperation and people-to-people contact. As Pakistan looks for opportunities to expand its international partnerships and Russia seeks to reassert itself in the region, the relationship between the two countries will be vital for the future of regional integration and stability. In the future, Pakistan-Russia relationship will rely on how better each party can play the global geopolitical game. They need to focus on areas of mutual interest such as energy, trade and security. Through closer engagement, Pakistan and Russia can not only deepen their bilateral relationship but also help to promote regional stability and prosperity in South Asia, Central Asia and beyond (Mehmood et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In summary, the shift from isolation to engagement and creation of complex interdependence in Pakistan-Russia relations marks a new phase of bilateral diplomatic, economic and military ties. Pakistan and Russia have acknowledged the importance of their relationship and have taken proactive measures to enhance it. By cooperating in tackling regional issues and promoting economic connectivity, Pakistan and Russia have the potential to become a key player in the future of South Asia, Central Asia and beyond. Their efforts in regional connectivity, energy security and defence will remain a cornerstone of their partnership in the future.

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