

Pakistan-Russia Relations: Developments and Limitations

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NIDS コメンタリー

No. 85 September 12, 2018

Preface

In May 2018, on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia (formerly the Soviet Union), Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement declaring that the long term multidimensional strategic partnership between the two countries will be mutually beneficial for the people of Pakistan and the Russian Federation and would contribute towards regional peace and stability.

After Pakistan gained independence in 1947 the relations of Pakistan and Russia were hostile for a long time, as symbolized by the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 and the resultant proxy war in which Pakistan played a major role with the backing of the United States and Saudi Arabia. However, Islamabad and Moscow have rapidly achieved rapprochement in recent years, in particular since 2014. This paper will give an overview of the series of events leading to the development of that closer Pakistan-Russia relationship, and discuss the background and the prospects going forward.

History of Pakistan-Russia relations

During the Cold War, the relations of Pakistan and Russia, who belonged to opposite camps within the bipolar structure, were largely hostile. Pakistan, which became independent in 1947, joined the Western camp in the 1950s and became a member of anticommunist alliances including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central

Treaty Organization (CENTO). Meanwhile the Soviet Union concluded the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971, entering a *de facto* alliance with Pakistan's archrival India, and at the end of the same year, India, with the backing of the Soviet Union, defeated Pakistan in the Third Indo-Pakistani War and forced the division of the Pakistani state. Moreover, when the Western countries chose the proxy war approach of supporting the Islamic militants in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Union which invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Pakistan, backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia, effectively executed the proxy war, through supplying weapons to the armed militants and recruiting and training fighters. This proxy war against the Soviet Union greatly depleted the national strength of the Soviet Union towards the end of the 1980s. In addition, Pakistan's close relationship with China since 1960s made it difficult for Islamabad to achieve rapprochement with Moscow, given the Sino-Soviet split in the Cold War.

These relations did not change immediately even after the end of the Cold War. The close relationship between India and the Soviet Union in the Cold War era was inherited by India and Russia, so Russia had little motivation to approach Pakistan at the expense of its relations with India. In addition, while Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s civil war in Afghanistan, Russia allied with Iran and India and took the side of the Northern Alliance, which fought against and was eventually overwhelmed by the Taliban. Russia saw those

moves by Pakistan in Afghanistan as an illustration of its ability to threaten the stability of the Central Asian Republics that were in Russia's sphere of influence by similarly supporting armed groups, and also accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorism in Chechnya and the Caucasus.¹

Since 2001 certain changes have occurred to these structures. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, Pakistan decided to join the U.S.-led war on terrorism and became supposedly hostile to the Afghan Taliban. In 2003 Pervez Musharraf became the first Pakistani president to visit Russia since 1972 where he declared that he believed that the Chechnya issue was a domestic issue for Russia and that Pakistan was not providing any support to the Islamic armed groups in Central Asia and Russia; this led to the first visit in 38 years to Pakistan by a Russian prime minister in 2007. Beginning with the 2002 Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, multiple frameworks for intergovernmental dialogue were established, and in 2009 the framework for a Quadripartite Summit joined by Afghanistan and Tajikistan was launched. In 2011, Russia expressed support for Pakistan's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the visit to Russia by President Zardari of Pakistan was realized.

However, setbacks were also seen around 2010. When Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited India in 2010, in consideration of the concerns of its traditional strategic partner India, he clearly stated that Russia had no military partnership with Pakistan. When he was reappointed president in 2012, Putin planned to visit Pakistan for the aforementioned Summit Meeting of the four countries, but his visit was suddenly cancelled. This event was interpreted as a serious setback in Pakistan-Russia relations. The background to this was that this visit to Pakistan would mean that Pakistan would become the first destination for Putin after his reappointment as President, and he

was worried that this might concern India.²

Development of relations in recent years

However, 2014 is the year which is said to be the turning point in Pakistan-Russia relations. First, Russia lifted its weapons embargo on Pakistan in June, and in October the navies of the two countries, together with their anti-drug agencies, carried out their first joint exercises regarding the control of drug smuggling in the northern Arabian Sea. Then in November, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu became the first minister of defense of the Soviet Union or Russia to visit Pakistan since 1969, and a wide-ranging military cooperation agreement, including exchanging information on politico-military issues, strengthening collaboration in the defense and counter-terrorism sectors, and sharing similar views on developments in Afghanistan, was concluded between Pakistan and Russia.³ This was considered to be an historical agreement for the relations between the two countries.

From the following year onwards, further specific developments continued to occur. As a result of the lifting of the weapons embargo, a purchase contract for two Mi-171E multi-role helicopters and four Mi-35M attack helicopters was agreed in 2015, and delivery was completed in 2016 and 2017 respectively. In addition, it became possible for Pakistan to directly import from Russia the Russian-made RD-93 engine used in the JF-17 combat aircraft, which Pakistan could only obtain via China previously. From September to October 2016 the first joint counterterrorism exercises between the armies of Pakistan and Russia were conducted in Pakistan. India strongly urged Russia not to participate in these exercises, but Russia did not accept this, and similar exercises were conducted from September to October 2017 as well. In December 2016 the first consultations on regional issues between the ministries of foreign affairs of Pakistan and Russia were held. Coming into 2018,

the establishment of a Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) at the deputy defense minister level to consult on military cooperation was decided, and in August the same year a memorandum of understanding regarding the expansion of naval cooperation was concluded. In addition, at the first meeting of the JMCC an agreement was signed to enable Pakistani military officers to receive training at Russian military training institutions for the first time in history. Furthermore, although the truth of this is not certain, the Pakistani Minister of Defense told the Russian media in April 2018 that Pakistan is interested in the procurement of air defense systems and T-90 tanks from Russia, and that an agreement regarding the purchase of Su-35 fighter aircraft from Russia would probably be reached in the next two or three years.⁴

Moves toward cooperation are advancing in the economic sphere as well. In October 2015 the two countries agreed that Russia would construct a gas pipeline costing two billion dollars that will connect the southern port city of Karachi and central city Lahore in Pakistan. In July 2017 Russian company Gazprom and Pakistan's Oil and Gas Development Company Limited signed a Memorandum of Understanding regarding cooperation for exploration and development, and in October an intergovernmental agreement pertaining to the supply of LNG was concluded between Pakistan and Russia, opening up a path for Gazprom to enter negotiations regarding the supply of LNG to Pakistan. Consultations are also being held regarding the plan to construct a 600 MW gas-fired power plant in southern Pakistan with Russian investment.

Background to Pakistan-Russia rapprochement

Such a rapprochement of the two countries has been facilitated by the developments in macro-level international relations in the 2010s. Pakistan's

relationship with its traditional ally, the United States, has dramatically deteriorated after the security situation in Afghanistan began to take a turn for the worse in 2006. Since then, Washington has been irritated by the fact that Islamabad, despite ostensibly being an ally, has continued to support the Afghan Taliban, which the United States and NATO have struggled to contain. Furthermore, relations worsened definitively in May 2011 when the United States assassinated al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden inside Pakistan. As a result, the Obama administration gradually reduced its assistance to Pakistan.⁵ The Trump administration has further strengthened the hardline stance toward Pakistan. In January 2018 the US Department of State announced that it was suspending almost all security assistance to Pakistan until Pakistan took decisive measures against the Afghan Taliban. Moreover, the United States is shutting down a variety of training programs for Pakistani military officers that had continued for a long time despite the friction between the United States and Pakistan.”⁶ In response to increased U.S. pressure, it had become necessary for Pakistan to search for a new partner, and one candidate that emerged was Russia. In particular, Russia looks attractive as an alternative source of state-of-the-art weapons to the United States. While the Pakistani military has largely depended on the United States for such weapons, Washington has repeatedly suspended the provision of those weapons, including spare parts, when it faced issues with Islamabad.

Viewed from the Russian side, while its traditional partner India had gradually deepened its relations with the United States since the 2000s, as symbolized by the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement, Russian relations with the United States and Europe worsened due to the Ukraine crisis in 2014. For that reason, it became necessary

for Russia to diversify its partnerships while maintaining its relations with India, and Pakistan began to emerge as a potential partner.

Looking at more specific aspects, at a time when India, which for a long time had strongly depended on Russian-made weapons, is expanding its procurement from the United States and Israel, and when Western sanctions are resulting in restrictions on Russia's energy exports, Moscow is seeking new markets for weapons and energy; Pakistan could become a candidate.⁷

In addition, Russia may intend to caution India against excessive rapprochement with the United States by becoming involved with Pakistan—which is in a hostile relationship with India.

The other fact that deserves attention is the role of China. In the midst of the friction with the United States over the war on terrorism, Pakistan has primarily depended on China with which it has built a “quasi-alliance” relationship since the 1960s. Meanwhile, China has forged a closer partnership with Russia in recent years as they both face increasingly serious friction with the United States. As a common partner, China can be seen as a factor encouraging the rapprochement of Pakistan and Russia. Recently, these three countries — sometimes touted as the “China-Russia-Pakistan axis” — have deepened their coordination, particularly on the Afghanistan issue.⁸

The Afghanistan issue and related counterterrorism topics are currently the main focus of Pakistan-Russia security cooperation. At a time when the United States is supporting the central government in Kabul and is being distracted by the Afghan Taliban, an indigenous insurgent, the two countries share the concern that the United States is unable to respond to the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), apparently a more serious threat, in

Afghanistan in recent years.⁹ Both Pakistan and Russia are in the position of feeling a direct security threat if ISIS-K gains a foothold in Afghanistan. Inside Pakistan, terrorist attacks have already occurred for which ISIS-K has claimed responsibility. Furthermore, because Islamic militant groups have been active previously in the Central Asian countries that Russia considers to be in its sphere of influence, it is likely that, once ISIS-K gains a foothold in Afghanistan, the group will easily advance into those countries adjacent to Afghanistan. At the same time Russia sees that cooperation with Pakistan, which still maintains links with the Afghan Taliban, is essential for the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan.¹⁰

Based on a common threat perception against ISIS-K, Pakistan and Russia are marching in step regarding engagement with the Afghan Taliban, which is actually fighting ISIS-K in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban and ISIS-K are the same in the sense that they are Islamic radical groups, but Pakistan has built relations with the former for a long time, and Russia understands ISIS-K to be a threat that could spread Islamic terrorism beyond Afghanistan, while it sees the Afghan Taliban as a local force that is only aiming to rule Afghanistan.¹¹ Russia is expressing its willingness to mediate peace between the present regime in Kabul and the Taliban, and Pakistan is supporting this. Moreover, it is often pointed out that Russia is providing support, including the provision of weapons, to the Taliban.¹² While Pakistan's support to the Taliban has been an open secret for a long time, this kind of rapprochement with the group is a policy switch for Russia, which was on the side hostile to the Taliban at the time of the Afghanistan Civil War in the 1990s. The Russian government has not officially acknowledged its support for the Taliban, but it has publicly stated that it supports diplomatic

engagement with the Taliban, that it is important that the group has not pledged allegiance to ISIS, that the interests of Russia and the Taliban are aligned, and that it is making contacts with the Taliban in order to secure the safety of Russian citizens in Afghanistan.^{1 3}

This kind of stance opposes the interests of the United States in Afghanistan, but Pakistan and Russia have an ulterior motive here too. Originally, when there were tensions between the United States and Pakistan over the relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, the Trump administration in the United States clarified its stance of seeking the help of India over the Afghanistan issue. However, for Pakistan which also has territorial issues with Afghanistan, the growing influence of India in Afghanistan provokes the fear of being “caught in a pincer movement” from east and west. That is why Pakistan sees that embedding the Taliban in the governance structure of Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban and weakening the present regime in Kabul is an attractive option—that reduces the influence of the present regime in Kabul as well as the United States and India which support it. For Russia too, if it can leverage its relations with the Taliban to realize peace between the present regime and the Taliban, it can open up a path to weakening the influence of the United States in Afghanistan and to avoiding the permanent military presence of the United States in Afghanistan, which Russia opposes.

Prospects and limits of Pakistan-Russia relations

Despite the background described above, experts believe there is a limit to the rapprochement of Pakistan and Russia. The largest restricting factor is India-Russia relations. India feels a strong sense of caution about Pakistan-Russia military

cooperation in particular and has communicated its disagreement with Russia at a variety of levels.

Even if its relations with Pakistan grow, for Russia those relations are still far less important than its relations with its traditional partner India. In particular regarding the arms trade, which may be considered the most important aspect of India-Russia relations, India remained in first place in Russia’s weapons exports by value from 2013-2017; Russian exports to India were approximately three times those to China in second place and approximately 47 times those to Pakistan.^{1 4} It has been pointed out that Russia’s military-industrial complex could not have survived without the presence of China and India.^{1 5} Looking at the size of its economy, there is no likelihood that Pakistan could conduct trade with Russia on the same scale as India. Taking these matters into account, although Russia may send a warning message to India, by its own engagement with Pakistan, about impetuous rapprochement with the United States, giving priority to its relations with Pakistan at the expense of its relations with India does not seem like a rational choice for Russia.

That is why Russia is showing a certain amount of consideration for India even now, although not to the same level as 2014 and earlier. As symbolized by the statement of the Russian Ambassador to India in July 2018, the position of Russia is that strategic relations with India, the most important relations for Russia, cannot be equalized with relations with Pakistan and that the security cooperation with Pakistan is limited to counterterrorism purposes.^{1 6} The military exercises are for the purpose of counterterrorism, and when India objected to the provision of Mi-35M helicopters to Pakistan, Russia explained that they would be used in counterterrorism operations.^{1 7}

The consideration for India is not limited to

military aspects. India is opposing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), advanced by China and Pakistan, which links Gwadar Port in Pakistan with Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, on the grounds that it violates Indian sovereignty by including projects in the Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Then at the end of 2016 there were media reports claiming that Russia may possibly participate in the CPEC or use the Gwadar Port that is at the core of the CPEC, but the Russian government clearly denied its participation in the CPEC. Russia is actively cooperating with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the concept that encompasses the CPEC, whereas India opposes the entire BRI including the CPEC now but only made clear its opposition to the CPEC at the time. In light of this and the fact that Russia is advancing economic engagement itself in Pakistan, it is apparent that behind Russia's stance toward the CPEC is its intention to avoid earning the displeasure of India.

Judging from these points, what Russia wants is to maintain its traditional relations with India and strengthen its relations with Pakistan in parallel, without getting involved in the India-Pakistan conflict, while it also hopes to divert India from deepening its relations with the United States, by leveraging its own relations with Pakistan. Regarding the weapons exports, inside Russia there is the expectation that they can sell weapons to Pakistan without damaging their relations with India in the same way as the US and France.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the attempt of Russia to insulate its own relations with India and Pakistan from the context of the India-Pakistan conflict will become more difficult as the content of the cooperation in Pakistan-Russia relations deepens. Pakistan positions all of its external relations in terms of how to compete with India, and has built closer relations

with the United States and China for this purpose. Therefore, contrary to the intent of Russia, Pakistan wishes to leverage Pakistan-Russia rapprochement in its anti-India strategy, and regardless of the actual situation, Pakistan will find an advantage in portraying the situation as "Russia has abandoned India, its former partner, and taken up with Pakistan." If India-Russia relations actually become estranged due to this, that is also favorable for Pakistan.

In fact, we can find this kind of structure between China-Pakistan and India. China, which also has border issues with India, has built strategic relations for more than 50 years with Pakistan, but today China seeks India's cooperation in order to successfully implement the BRI, which is positioned as a pillar of the Xi Jinping administration's foreign policy, and the CPEC under it. However, Pakistan, in particular the army which dominates security policy, understands the CPEC as an extension of the traditional strategic relations with China and regards it as a strategic "chance"—which enables Islamabad to strengthen the backing of Beijing in the India-Pakistan dispute by increasing the importance of Pakistan to China. Within the Pakistan's strategic community, there is abundant discourse regarding this strategic significance of the CPEC. On the other hand, India has interpreted the CPEC to be a part of China and Pakistan's containment of India in line with said intent of Pakistan and strengthened its backlash against the CPEC and the BRI. As a result, since the Doklam crisis between China and India came to an end in August 2017, China seems to be driven to damage control in its relations with India.

Given such a distorted alliance management approach by Pakistan, it is quite difficult for Russia to further deepen Pakistan-Russia relations in parallel with maintaining traditional relations with India. This is even more true if Russia starts

providing weapons such as T-90 tanks and Su-35 fighter aircraft that have broader purposes than mere “improvement of the counterterrorism capacity of Pakistan” and could have an effect on the conventional forces balance between India and Pakistan.

In addition, from Pakistan’s perspective, issues like counterterrorism and stabilization of Afghanistan—which are apparently irrelevant to the context of Indo-Pakistan conflict — cannot be separated from its competition with India. Inside Pakistan, the theory is widely accepted that the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India’s external intelligence agency, is supporting ISIS-K in causing terrorism inside Pakistan via Afghanistan and trying to destabilize Pakistan.¹⁹ However, as a partner of India, Russia probably does not share this narrative. This point itself may not seriously obstruct Pakistan-Russia cooperation in countering ISIS-K, but what can be anticipated is when the focus of the Afghanistan issue eventually shifts from short-term stabilization to the long-term future of the country, a gap will emerge between Pakistan, which is trying to eliminate the influence of India in Afghanistan to a paranoid degree, and Russia, which as the partner country of India accepts the role of India in Afghanistan to some extent. Russia clearly understands India to be a stakeholder in the future of Afghanistan. Russia is making moves such as cooperating with India by also involving Iran, pushing forward a connectivity scheme from Iran through Afghanistan to Central Asia and Russia, agreeing to joint projects with India in Afghanistan in the May 2018 India-Russia Summit, and holding high-level consultations with India regarding the Afghanistan issue.

In the 2000s in the context of the rise of India and cooperation with Pakistan in the war on terrorism, the United States tried to strengthen its relations

with both India and Pakistan separately, but failed. Currently, it is China that is attempting to improve relations with India centered on economic aspects, while separately advancing cooperation with its traditional partner Pakistan, but it is far from successful. In light of these precedents of the US and China, there is little evidence to conclude that Russia will succeed in similarly separating its respective relations with India and Pakistan. To add, unlike the US and China which were partners of Pakistan for a long time, Russia has almost no experience regarding management of relations with Pakistan, and because Russia traditionally has been a partner of India, it is anticipated that Russia’s deepening cooperation with Pakistan will invite a stronger backlash from India.

Moreover, if Russia, faced with these difficulties, hesitates to further deepen its relations with Pakistan, it is doubtful that the effort needed to overcome that obstacle will emerge from the Pakistan side. For Pakistan, strengthening relations with Russia beyond the current cooperation — focused on countering ISIS-K and stabilizing Afghanistan—may be beneficial but not essential. Apart from the United States, a traditional ally with which relations are worsening, the most important country for Pakistan is China, followed by the gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia.

It cannot be denied that the rapprochement of Pakistan-Russia relations in recent years progressed rapidly because it in a sense started from “nothing.” Of course, the cooperation that has been achieved in that context will probably continue going forward. However, it seems that many hurdles still remain before that cooperation becomes a strategic partnership which goes beyond counterterrorism, the Afghanistan issue, and a “jab” at the rapprochement of the US and India.

(Completed September 5, 2018)

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