

## PAKISTAN-RUSSIA EMERGING COOPERATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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### **Abstract**

*Bilateral relations between states have always been dynamic and can go in either direction. For much of history, Pakistan and Russia have remained in a contained relationship, particularly during the Cold War. However, post 9/11, due to changes in Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy, gradual ground for re-engagement has risen into prominence between Russia and Pakistan. But, because of the troubling history, both sides remained distant. However, for the past ten years, due to the change in the international order, both countries found each other in the convergence of bilateral relations. The research paper intended to employ the commercial liberalism branch of neoliberal institutionalism to evaluate emerging bilateral ties between Russia and Pakistan. Based on Immanuel Kant's principle of universal hospitality, commercial liberalism sheds light on the importance of economic interdependence and free trade in sustaining peace. The impending challenges and compelling opportunities were discussed in this paper. The nature of bilateral relations sprouted from opportunities and challenges and was categorised into complementary and non-complementary bifurcation. Based on this division, the research has argued that the trajectory of emergent bilateral relations has ample space to grow and head upward. The study suggests that institutional mechanisms such as JMCC, JMC, and JWGs, with their potential to navigate challenges, offer reassurance in the face of potential obstacles in bilateral relations.*

**Keywords:** Bilateral Relations, Commercial Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, National Interest, Geopolitical Environment, Cold War.

### **Introduction**

**T**he relations between states are determined by their national interests. The international system supports the idea that there are no permanent enemies or friends. The geopolitical environment during the Cold War made relations between the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and Pakistan cold. As the USSR could not satiate the economic need of a nascent state, the idea of a balance of power sprouted from the insecurities for Pakistan on eastern borders and pushed towards the American side. Such dynamics pushed the USSR to ally with India to keep the balance of power in South Asia. Consequently, Pak-Soviet relations have been shaped by Pak-US ties and the Indo-Soviet alliance since the beginning.

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However, during the Cold War, both nations attempted to maintain cordial relations and expand cooperation in energy and metallurgical sectors, strengthening ties. In the 1960s and 1970s, Pakistan received assistance from the USSR to establish the Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDCL) and Pakistan Steel Mills. However, their conflicting regional interests prevented them from working together in the defence sector. They only managed to strike one deal for maverick helicopters in 1969 throughout the Cold War. Ties further deteriorated with the signing of the 1971 Treaty of Friendship between India and the USSR. The USSR finally fell apart as a result of Pakistan's pivotal role in encouraging jihad in Afghanistan, which subsequently worsened relations between the two countries.

Relations between Russia and Pakistan were restored in the post-Cold War era, particularly after 9/11, when Pakistan stopped supporting the Taliban and joined forces with the US in the War on Terror. High-level meetings aided in identifying shared interests afterwards. This shift led to enhanced defence cooperation, marked by reciprocal high-level visits and Russia's support for Pakistan's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) membership.<sup>1</sup> The defence ties were further strengthened with joint military exercises in 2016 and potential collaboration with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Russia's support for Pakistan's stance on Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) membership and full SCO membership in 2017 underscored the growing partnership.<sup>2</sup> The bilateral cooperation extends across various economic sectors, aiming to stabilise Afghanistan and expand Russia's influence while reducing Pakistan's reliance on Western aid and diversifying its diplomatic relations.

Furthermore, the threat of terrorism and extremism spreading from unstable Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia and Pakistan has prompted China, Pakistan, and other regional stakeholders to work together bilaterally at multilateral fora like the SCO to eradicate terrorism from the region. Pakistan and Russia need to work closely together to improve the connectivity and security of the area, and both nations must develop institutional frameworks to remove obstacles from their interactions.

This research applies neoliberal institutional elements while concentrating on the elements that bind both nations together to tackle 'the tacit and fragmented policies' and promote more explicit engagement between the two.<sup>3</sup> Economic, defence, energy, and counterterrorism variables have been discussed. These facets unfold the rationale regarding the challenges and opportunities in emerging bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan. This paper attempts to project the trajectory of emerging bilateral ties between the two countries. The trajectory is dissected based on complementary and non-complementary challenges and opportunities.

## **Pakistan-Russia Relations: A Historical Overview**

During the Cold War, Pakistan and the USSR collaborated a little, mainly in the energy sector. The Soviet Union's assistance was central in constructing OGDCL in

1961 and Pakistan Steel Mills in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Except for the 1969 Maverick Helicopter contract, Pakistan and Russia had no formal defence contracts during the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union could not compete with the US, particularly in the economic arena. Pakistan was therefore inclined towards the US to obtain the necessary military and financial support against a formidable foe, India. Russia and India were forced to work closely together because of the Pakistan-US and Sino-Pakistan nexus. This was demonstrated by the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty and the Soviet Union's assistance of India during the 1971 war between Pakistan and India.<sup>6</sup> According to former Soviet foreign intelligence chief Leonid Shebarshin of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) and Indian Intelligence Bureau officer Malloy Krishna Dhar, the USSR trained and armed Mukti Bahini rebels in East Pakistan, which ultimately caused Pakistan to fall apart.<sup>7</sup> Due to the US' neutral stance in both wars, despite their 1959 cooperation agreement, Pakistan thought to diversify its contacts after the conflicts between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 by moving closer to China and Russia.<sup>8</sup> Pakistan left the US alliances in the 1970s and joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto made two trips to Moscow in March 1972 and 1974 to foster better ties.<sup>9</sup> The first visit yielded the desired results as the bilateral relations and trade were restored. The visit resulted in building a steel mill in Karachi with the assistance of the Soviet Union. The second visit by PM Bhutto contributed to the growth of bilateral relations until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>10</sup> After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan later in the 1980s, ties once more declined. Pakistan battled the US proxy in Afghanistan, which ultimately caused the USSR to fall apart.<sup>11</sup> In the early years of the post-Cold War era, Asia was of little importance to the newly formed Russia led by Boris Yeltsin following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its gaze was fixed on Europe, due to which Russia gave little importance to improving relations with Pakistan. This divide widened after Pakistan accepted the Taliban regime in Kabul in 1996, a move that alarmed Russia because it was thought to incite extremist elements in Central Asia and its southern region.<sup>12</sup>

## **After 9/11**

The relationship remained chilly until Pakistan abandoned its support for the Taliban and aligned itself with the US in the "war on terror" following the 9/11 attacks. Following the 9/11 attacks, relations between Pakistan and Russia started to improve, particularly in the area of defence, when Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov visited Islamabad on an official visit in April 2001. President Pervez Musharraf returned the favour in 2003 by visiting Russia.<sup>13</sup> In 2011, President Putin supported Pakistan's bid to join the SCO, raising the possibility of a change in Russian policy.<sup>14</sup> When Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu visited Islamabad in November 2014, defence ties showed significant progress, and Moscow and Islamabad decided to strengthen defence ties. 2016, both nations conducted their first-ever combined military drills after his visit.<sup>15</sup> In April 2021 in Islamabad, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hinted at Russia's formal entry into the CPEC. Pavel Didkovsky, the first secretary of the Russian Embassy in Islamabad, disclosed that

Russia supported Pakistan's demanding criteria-based admission to the NSG for nations that have not ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>16</sup> Pakistan's 2017 admission to the SCO as a full member became possible partly with the crucial support of Russia.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Pakistan and Russia will collaborate in many important economic areas, such as commerce, information technology (IT), agriculture, power, petroleum, railroads, and water.<sup>18</sup> As part of its strategy to increase its influence over both its immediate (the Baltic, Caucasus, and Eastern Europe) and distant (South Asia and the Middle East) regions, Russia sees cooperation with Pakistan as a means of stabilising Afghanistan, which hinders the realisation of Russia's strategy. Strengthening relations with Russia would broaden Pakistan's diplomatic sphere of influence beyond China and lessen Pakistan's reliance on Western assistance.<sup>19</sup>

The upward trend in Pakistan-Russian relations can be attributed to the opportunities brought about by shifting regional and global dynamics. Notwithstanding, certain limitations persist in their interactions, including the well-established connections between Russia and India, mistrust between the two nations, and Pakistan's over-reliance on China. However, the geopolitical environment indicates that the former rivals will work together. Russia tries to moderate ties between Pakistan and India. The phone conversations Putin had with the Premiers of India and Pakistan on August 24 and 25, respectively, and after the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, 2021, serve as examples of this.<sup>20</sup> Calls resulted in PM Khan inviting President Putin to visit Pakistan, and PM Modi established a permanent bilateral channel for consultations on Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

Russia is interested in expanding ties with Pakistan after the West turned back on it following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine. Western sanctions followed the annexation of Crimea and have become more severe after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>22</sup> Russia will now look to Asia to close the economic and political deficit.<sup>23</sup> Pakistan might use this to strengthen its diplomatic and commercial ties with Russia. However, it would not be without challenges, as Ukraine and Pakistan have had Defence relations since the late 1990s. The Defence trade between Pakistan and Ukraine was estimated to be worth US\$1.6 billion between 1991 and 2020.<sup>24</sup> Pakistan has been a primary user of T-80 UD tanks from Ukraine since 1997.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the US support for Ukraine confronts Pakistan with a dilemma in balancing relations with Russia. Pakistan expressed worry about the humanitarian situation in Ukraine while also abstaining from voting against Russia at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).<sup>26</sup> Pakistan is claimed to have provided small arms to Ukraine via Europe<sup>27</sup> and, at the same time, imported discounted Russian crude oil despite the Western sanctions.<sup>28</sup>

In times of economic distress, Pakistan relies on cheap Russian oil to secure its energy security, but an escalation of war will hinder or even halt the oil shipment. After the West broke connections, Moscow sought new markets like Pakistan. Another barrier to importing Russian oil is Pakistan's oil refinery capacity, which is currently tailored to Middle Eastern crude.<sup>29</sup> Pakistan imports 80 per cent of its oil from the

Middle East. The long distance and the inability of Pakistani ports to handle large vessels from Russia raise transportation costs. Before offloading at Pakistani ports, supertankers carrying Urals crude had to be transferred to smaller ships known as lightering operations in Oman, which cost an additional US\$2 to US\$3 per barrel.<sup>30</sup> Despite this increase, Ural crude is less expensive than Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) crude, but its quality is inferior to Saudi Arabia and UAE crude.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Pakistan can only accept one cargo shipment per month. Pakistan cannot upgrade its refinery system due to financial and technical restrictions.<sup>32</sup>

## **Theoretical Framework**

Their shared history still dominates Russia and Pakistan's relationship. Both countries were enemies with opposing interests throughout the Cold War. Russia and Pakistan became closer after the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, particularly after 9/11 when Pakistan changed its stance on the Taliban. These days, their interests in the area align, especially in light of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, which has created a security void in the area. A security void might be used by violent groups operating in the area, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which would likely cause instability and the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Central Asia, and the southern region of Russia. According to David Mitran, a pioneer of the integration movement in the early post-war years, states were ill-prepared to deal with modernisation. He put out the idea of "ramification", which holds that collaboration between the government and industry should begin in technical domains before, if advantageous, potentially spreading to other government agencies.<sup>33</sup>

A bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Pakistan and Russia is necessary because it will deepen and complicate their relationship and pave the way for collaboration in other areas, particularly defence, where their interests align. Though no agreements about the FTA have been reached, Pakistan has granted Russia access to its strategically significant Gwadar port. This may clear the path for an FTA between the two. Pakistan is a gateway to regional integration. Russia has also alluded to joining the CPEC and hopes to combine the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to improve regional connectivity. Pakistan is also prepared to increase trade, draw in Russian investment, purchase Russian weaponry, and import Russian crude. Given the regional context and the convergence of interests of the two nations, the theory of commercial liberalism is the most appropriate framework for evaluating their relationship. This idea supports international collaboration, trade, and investment in the pursuit of peace.<sup>34</sup> Commercial liberals argue that there is a direct and beneficial correlation between peace and increased trade between states. Greater cooperation on more significant and broader political and security concerns can be built from scratch through economic cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, which were once bitter foes.<sup>35</sup> Since employing force in Afghanistan only resulted in instability, terrorism, corruption, poverty, and humanitarian crises throughout the previous 20 years, the instability must be

addressed in economic development, investment, and commerce. Thus far, the regional states' utilisation of multilateral venues to avoid any unfavourable circumstances in Afghanistan is praiseworthy. Their handling of the new regime in Kabul also makes it clear that no nation would acknowledge the Taliban unless they uphold women's rights, act against IS-K and other terrorist groups, and establish an inclusive government.

## Opportunities

### Economy

The two countries started economic relations when the USSR consented to import leather, cotton, and jute from Pakistan in the early 1950s.<sup>36</sup> Pakistan and the former Soviet Union did not collaborate much. Nevertheless, following the Cold War and particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, collaboration surged. India and China's economic links to Russia have historically outweighed those of Pakistan with Russia. China and India have commerce valued at US\$110 billion and US\$8 billion with Russia. Over the past 23 years, Pakistan's exports to Russia have climbed from US\$13 million to US\$277 million, while Russia's exports to Pakistan have increased from US\$67.6 million in 1996 to US\$277 million in 2019.<sup>37</sup> Despite an increase in global commerce, economic interconnectedness was not strengthened. However, due to the previous Eurasian integration policy, which places Pakistan in a solid position to both act as a buffer against regional terrorism and provide a secure trade route for Russian energy supplies and other exports, there is a good chance that the two countries economic ties will strengthen.

In addition, Russia is regarded as a global energy superpower, leading the way in gas and oil exports. Before European sanctions and its transition to renewable energy, Europe had obtained 66% of its energy requirements from Russia. Sanctions reduced energy supplies and, eventually, affected the Russian economy. Russia is looking to Pakistan and other new energy partners to compensate for this loss.<sup>38</sup> Pakistan must import gas to make up the 1.5 billion cubic feet per day gap. The National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) ordered Prime Minister Imran Khan to declare a national power emergency in 2020 due to rising electricity prices and a US\$1.9 trillion cumulative circular debt. The Islamic Trade Finance Corporation provided Pakistan with US\$4.5 billion in assistance in 2021 to cover the cost of importing petroleum, crude oil and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).<sup>39</sup> This industry makes the expansion of ties between Pakistan and Russia possible. During his visit to Pakistan in April 2021, FM Lavrov of Russia noted that Rostam and the Atomic Energy Commission of Pakistan are investigating ways to work together on using nuclear energy for industrial and medical purposes.<sup>40</sup> After the US sanctions on Russian enterprises affected the Pak Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP), also known as the North-South Corridor, Russia and Pakistan recently brought it back to life. Gas will be delivered to Lahore via this US\$2 billion pipeline from the southern ports of Karachi and Gwadar.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan is important to Russia because it offers access to the Gulf and

the Arabian Sea, the path of pipeline projects, acts as a backdoor to Iran, and a counterbalance to China and India.<sup>42</sup>

The resolution of the four-decade-old trade dispute in November 2019, caused by the disintegration of the USSR, indicates the importance of both countries' accord to economic ties. Both countries started negotiations in 2016 to resolve the trade dispute, resulting in Pakistan paying a fine worth US\$93.5 million, thus paving the way for more open economic engagement.<sup>43</sup> The impact was reflected in bilateral trade in the succeeding years. In 2020, the bilateral trade volume reached a record US\$790 million, a 45 per cent increase from the last year.<sup>44</sup>

In 2021, Pakistan's imports from Russia made US\$778.26 million of the total trade volume.<sup>45</sup> The following year, the bilateral trade volume dropped to US\$534.08 million due to supply chain disruptions in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, in 2023, bilateral trade rebounded to a record US\$915.16 million, nearing a US\$1 billion mark, which will potentially be surpassed in the coming years.<sup>46</sup> The rise of bilateral trade is a positive development in furthering bilateral ties.

## **Defence**

Except for the 1969 Maverick helicopter contract, defence cooperation did not exist during the Cold War.<sup>47</sup> However, after the 9/11 attacks, both nations came to share the same geopolitical reality when Pakistan joined the US in the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan. However, relations between Pakistan and Russia in defence have gradually improved. Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu's first visit to Islamabad in 45 years, in November 2014, signified a major shift in policy.<sup>48</sup> Subsequently, in August 2015, Pakistan and Russia inked a historic defence agreement that transferred four MI 35 (hind E) attack helicopters to Pakistan after then-COAS Raheel Sharif paid a visit to Russia on 15 June 2015.<sup>49</sup> The first joint counterterrorism exercise between Pakistan and Russia, *druzhbha* (friendship), occurred in Cherat in September 2016 in defiance of New Delhi's objections.<sup>50</sup> In 2017, the Russian navy's largest anti-submarine destroyer, *Sevmorsk*, participated in a multi-national joint Naval AMAN exercise in Karachi.<sup>51</sup> Both nations established a Joint Military Commission (JMC) in 2018. Following their first Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) meeting, Pakistan and Russia inked a Security Training Agreement on August 7, 2018, enabling Pakistani military officers to receive instruction from Russian military institutions.<sup>52</sup>

Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, there has been a concern about further instability. Pakistan and Russia's defence cooperation has increased. Russia and Pakistan are closer when it comes to fighting terrorism because the former has a direct border with Afghanistan and may experience a refugee outflow as well as the spread of extremism and terrorism to Pakistan, according to previous experiences. Although Russia does not share a border with Afghanistan, terrorists can exploit the territory of Afghanistan to breach the tenuous security of Central Asia and cause instability in

regions with a high Muslim population, such as the Southern region of Russia. As a result, both nations are aware of the necessity of working together to combat terrorism. In 2012, Pakistan and the Russian envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, considered reining in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihad, who aimed to infiltrate Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from their strongholds in Afghanistan. They were among the terrorist organisations that China, Russia, and Pakistan discussed to cut off tentacles in December 2016. Additionally, Moscow and Islamabad engaged in the SCO and the enlarged troika arrangement in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> The accusations of Pakistani support of terrorism have been refuted multiple times by Russian officials. For instance, Zamir Kabulov said in July 2021 that Pakistan did not want to convert Afghanistan into an Islamic Emirate since the Taliban's victory would give Pakistani extremists more confidence.<sup>54</sup> Amidst the ongoing global battle against "terrorism and extremism, including existing challenges as well as new and emerging threats to international and regional peace and security", high officials convened on November 16th, 2018, to mark the 9th meeting of the Russia-Pakistan Joint Working Group (JWG) on Combatting International Terrorism.<sup>55</sup> The current regional scenario necessitates Pakistan-Russia defence ties in terms of curbing terrorism.

## **Social and Cultural Relations**

The two countries established social and cultural ties by signing a one-year agreement for an educational exchange programme in 1964 and starting a second programme on June 5, 1965.<sup>56</sup> Pakistan printed issues of the Soviet journal *Tulu* throughout the 1960s.<sup>57</sup> Under the Soviet era, cooperation in the field remained essentially non-existent. Though there has been a slight improvement since 2010, additional work is still required. For instance, Moscow State University and Pakistan's National University of Modern Languages have appointed Urdu and Russian language faculties.<sup>58</sup> A student exchange programme between Moscow State University and Punjab University has concluded.<sup>59</sup> The first Urdu-Russian dictionary was released in 2012 by Russian physician Tashmirza Khalmirev, who resides in Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> However, there haven't been any significant initiatives to improve interpersonal relationships, such as those between Chinese and Pakistani citizens. It is one of the cornerstones of state-to-state relations in the contemporary world. Russia's sole non-governmental pollster, Levada, claims that the public views India as one of its closest partners. Pakistan, meanwhile, fails to even place in the top five.<sup>61</sup>

## **Regional Integration: BRI and EAEU**

Pakistan is trying to draw in investment to sustain its severely damaged economy. For this reason, initiatives for regional integration, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), give Pakistan a great chance to attract foreign investment. This is evidenced by agreements on regional integration between the two that date back to 2015. By Putin's 2016 proposal of a "Greater Eurasia Partnership" involving the EAEU member states, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Commonwealth countries, Russia aims to unify the Eurasian region simultaneously through overland trade and



infrastructure.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Pakistan's geopolitical location—which connects South, Central, and West Asia as envisioned by Russian policies—raises its relevance for Russia. Andrew Korybko called Pakistan the "zipper of Pan-Eurasian integration".<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Pakistan has agreed to provide Russia access to the port of Gwadar, providing a feasible and safe alternate route for trade across the Strait of Malacca to reach the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Persian Gulf. Additionally, Russia expressed interest in joining the CPEC, as evidenced by statements made by Alexey Devoc, the Russian ambassador to Pakistan at the time, in 2016 that Russia "strongly supported" the project and that both nations had considered integrating the EAEU with the CPEC.<sup>64</sup> Pakistan's advantageous geopolitical location has made it a sought-after partner for global powers interested in the South Asian region.<sup>65</sup>

### **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS**

China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan formed the Shanghai Five organisation in 1996 to work together in security and counterterrorism. This organisation served as SCO's foundation. To foster economic growth and combat terrorism, extremism, and terrorism, the Tashkent Summit of 2004 established a regional anti-terrorist framework. The SCO has grown with the addition of other new nations, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. In addition to increasing geographically, SCO expanded the scope of its mandate by including transportation, organised crime, drug and weapon smuggling, cyberterrorism, and other areas. The SCO member states concluded that instability in Afghanistan reflected instability across Southwest, Central, and South Asia. The SCO member nations also agreed that multilateral and international collaboration on political, economic, and social concerns is necessary to combat this threat. The Taliban seizure of Kabul serves as a stark example of how no nation in the area accepted their authority, leading them to devise a strategy towards Afghanistan together.

The year 2017 saw Pakistan's SCO membership. Pakistan's SCO membership was mainly obtained thanks to Russia, suggesting that the two countries are coming closer.<sup>66</sup> China and Russia opposed India's attempt to bring this matter before the SCO forum after the Pulwama incident. Nonetheless, Russia supported an Indian-sponsored resolution at the UNSC that demanded that the leader of the Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) be designated as an international terrorist for the Pulwama attack (which later proved to be a false flag operation funded by India).<sup>67</sup> However, Russia balanced its relations between India and Pakistan.

Based on the 2023 data of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), BRICS members collectively made up 31.53 per cent of the world's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) concerning Purchasing Power Parity (PPP).<sup>68</sup> BRICS represent 41.25 per cent of the world's total population. Its GDP is expected to grow to 40 per cent by 2040. With the addition of new members, its total GDP at PPP has increased to 36.9 per cent, accounting for more than half (55.75 per cent) of the world's population.<sup>69</sup> In

2023, Group of Seven (G7) countries' estimated GDP at PPP was 29 per cent compared to 31.53 per cent of BRICS.<sup>70</sup>

On 24 August 2023, BRICS extended memberships to six new countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, Argentina, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In 2023, 40 countries and regions sought BRICS membership, and 22 formally applied.<sup>71</sup> With the addition of new members, the organisation will grow stronger. Moreover, BRICS members wield significant influence over leading international organisations such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, and G20. As of 2023, their collective votes account for 14 per cent at the World Bank and 15 per cent of the quota share at the IMF.<sup>72</sup>

Given the increasing political, economic, and diplomatic clout of BRICS countries, Pakistan should join. It will enable Pakistan to trade with member countries and attract investment. BRICS members will have the world's half of oil and gas resources.<sup>73</sup> Four of its members, including China, Brazil, India, and Russia, are the top four food producers in the world. This will allow Pakistan to overcome its energy and food shortages. In addition, Pakistan will have access to funds and resources allocated by the New Development Bank (NDB) of BRICS. NDB will serve as an alternative to Western-dominated lending institutions like the IMF and World Bank, thus reducing their influence on Pakistan's policy and decision-making.<sup>74</sup>

However, Pakistan will also face several challenges to join BRICS. India will block Pakistan's entry into the organisation using political instability, weak economy, and insecurity in Pakistan as an argument. Another challenge will come from the West, which perceives BRICS as a counterbalance to Western institutions. Moreover, the Pakistani government must ensure political stability and consensus to get into BRICS.<sup>75</sup>

## China-Russia Relations

Russia and China's "mutual political trust" is "continuously deepening," contrary to the past, when Russia was sceptical of China. Beijing seeks Moscow's collaboration in "safeguarding international fairness" and "justice". President Xi met President Putin 42 times in the past ten years, leading to a good working relationship and deepening friendship.<sup>76</sup> Though their relations have evolved over the years, the Ukraine-Russia war, which began in February 2022, has brought neighbours closer to each other. "In the current challenging conditions, close foreign policy coordination is essential – which is what we are doing, and today we will also discuss all of this", President Putin said in a meeting taking place in Beijing on the sidelines of an event to mark ten years of BRI on 18 October 2023.<sup>77</sup> China has not condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and relations between the two have remained warm amid the war. China has even been providing ways to Moscow to evade the US and European Union (EU) sanctions imposed in the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EU and US have also blocked Chinese companies that are assisting Russia in evading sanctions.<sup>78</sup> On a phone call on February 8, 2024, President Xi Jinping and

President Vladimir Putin denounced the “US policy of interfering in the internal affairs of other states”.<sup>79</sup> Russia also supports the ‘one China’ policy of its friend regarding Taiwan, which China claims as its own.

China and Russia’s defence and economic ties are also expanding. China is the largest importer of Russian arms. Between 2014 and 2019, 76% of China’s arms imports came from Russia.<sup>80</sup> Beijing has benefitted from cheap Russian energy imports and vast natural resources, including gas shipment through the power of the Siberia pipeline. China’s oil and coal imports from Russia constitute 15 per cent and 25 per cent of the total imports, respectively.<sup>81</sup> Bilateral trade between both countries has reached US\$218.2 billion compared to US\$110.79 billion in 2019. China and Russia are gradually eliminating trade in dollars by replacing it with Roubles and Yuan. Both countries stressed the need to build a “financial infrastructure that ensures reliability of payments”.<sup>82</sup>

The warming of relations between China, Pakistan’s all-weather friend, and Russia paves the way for further deepening emerging ties between Pakistan and Russia. Pakistan remains an important strategic partner of China. CPEC serves China’s strategic purpose of economic and energy security. Russia is interested in CPEC for strategic and financial reasons, which might produce the Pakistan-China-Russia ‘axis’.<sup>83</sup>

## **Discussion on Compelling Opportunities**

The likely scenario of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Russia can well be explained by analysing the nature of the compelling opportunities discussed in this paper. The nature of bilateral compelling opportunities is divided into complementary and non-complementary, as shown in Table 1. This indicates ample opportunities to contribute to a complementary relationship between Pakistan and Russia in various sectors, thus creating trust and interdependence per neoliberal institutionalism. Economically, Pakistan offers Russia a land route to massive regional economic markets in South Asia and the Middle East. On the other hand, Russia complements this opportunity by providing oil and crude to energy-deficient Pakistan. Another complementary sector is social and cultural ties. Social and cultural engagement through student exchange programmes can strengthen people-to-people ties and decrease the trust deficit between them. Russia-Pakistan collaboration under the regional organisation SCO will further build confidence in their relationship, especially in the counterterrorism domain, which will be beneficial for maintaining peace in the region. The deepening relations between Russia and China also directly influence the relationship between Pakistan and Russia, given that Pakistan and China are neighbours and strategic partners. Russia-Pakistan will have a non-complementary relationship in defence because the latter relies heavily on Chinese and Western weapons. The defence imports from China have grown over the years compared to those from the West. Therefore, this domain presents little room for cooperation; however, bilateral counterterrorism efforts may complement it in future. Most of the

opportunities are complementary, showing that the trajectory of the emerging relationship between Russia and Pakistan will likely go upward.

**Table 1:** Overview of the Nature of Opportunities for Mutual Cooperation between Pakistan and Russia

Opportunity	Description	Nature
Economy	Pakistan can be a gateway to South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Middle East markets for Russia. Russia offers Pakistan cheaper energy (crude and gas), creating interdependence and paving the way for regional integration.	Complementary
Defence	Russia will benefit from exporting arms to Pakistan, while Pakistan will have advanced weaponry.	Non-Complementary
Social and Cultural ties	Student exchange programmes will improve understanding between the peoples of Pakistan and Russia, resulting in more amicable policymaking and less hostility.	Complementary
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	The SCO will help the former foes build confidence, mainly through counterterrorism collaboration. Their collaboration will broaden the diplomatic outreach on critical issues in the UNGA and other international forums.	Complementary
China-Russia Relations	Deepening relations between Russia and China will complement Pakistan and Russia's relations. The West has closed its doors to Russia, while China opens its arms and joins hands with Russia, benefiting all three strategically and economically.	Complementary

## Challenges

### Russia-India Relationship

India and Russia have a shared past. During the Cold War, they shared a strategic connection that they now describe as unique and privileged. India firmly said that purchasing the S-400 system benefited India on the occasion of its delivery, citing their unique relationship as justification.<sup>84</sup> This reaction was given amid Turkey and other US-sanctioned nations buying weaponry from Russia. In addition, leaders of Russia and India engage in several forums, including yearly summits and the BRICS, SCO, and RIC forums, where they can debate and share opinions on local and global

concerns. China and other big nations may oppose India's participation in the NSG and an expanded UNSC, but Russia is a staunch supporter of both.<sup>85</sup> Russia has kept supplying military hardware, including the most modern S-400 air defence missile delivery system, in defiance of China's objections.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, even though India's weapon import percentage decreased by 16% between 2015 and 2019 compared to 2009–2014, Russia continues to be India's top arms exporter, accounting for 56% of the country's imports. In contrast, Pakistan imported 6.6% of its armaments from Russia during that time.<sup>87</sup> The trade numbers for the first seven months of 2019 show that Russia's commerce with Pakistan was US\$532 million, while its trade with India was US\$7.55 billion.<sup>88</sup>

Since India is one of Russia's biggest customers for military hardware, the country would never want to lose. However, as the global landscape shifts, things are gradually altering. Russia is concerned about the West's intention to restrain China, with India at the lead. Russia is aware of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which is co-led by the US and includes India.<sup>89</sup> During their recent 21st annual bilateral India-Russia meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Putin struck several agreements that were expected to be signed. Still, they ultimately fell through, including a significant security accord. The 28 agreements that were reached through mutual consent did not materialise. Just two came to pass: The Intergovernmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation was renewed, and Kalashnikov Ak-203 assault weapons were produced locally.<sup>90</sup> It is the outcome of Delhi's diversification in the military hardware it buys from nations like the US, France, and Israel. Pakistan can also take advantage of this to close the gap.

Just as Washington does, Russia will always face challenges in striking a balance between Pakistan and India. One more significant obstacle to accurately defining the boundaries between Pakistan and India is the Kashmir dispute. In hindsight, Russia and the former Soviet Union unwaveringly backed India's position on the Kashmir dispute in every international forum, including the UNSC. Russia must take caution going forward to avoid upsetting Pakistan, which could endanger their collaboration in the fight against terrorism.

## **The Suspicion of the Revival of the US-Pakistan Relations**

Russia's mistrust of the resurgence of ties between Pakistan and the US is one of the factors contributing to the rift between the two countries. The US-Pakistan relationship is not good right now, but like in the past, things could change. For example, disappointed by US neutrality in the conflict, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto implemented the Look East strategy following Pakistan's split in 1971. Subsequently, in the latter part of the 1970s, Pakistan enabled jihad against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. In addition, the US removed its sanctions following Pakistan's commitment to support the US in the fight against terrorism.

Russia is gradually strengthening its ties with Pakistan. Pakistan's first national security policy, which places economic security at the core of comprehensive national security, was recently adopted by the National Security Committee.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, FM Qureshi urged envoys from the US, Austria, Iran, Turkey, Russia, the Netherlands, and permanent representatives to New York and Geneva to use economic diplomacy to strengthen financial security while presiding over the interactive discussion.<sup>92</sup> This will help reduce mistrust between the two countries by demonstrating how to move forward. Nonetheless, Pakistan would face great difficulty maintaining a balance between the big powers in the face of a shifting regional and global political environment.

### **Pakistan's Economic Dependence on China and IMF**

China is Pakistan's biggest bilateral creditor. Pakistan owes US\$23 billion to China. The Chinese government directly lent US\$14.5 billion (approximately half of the total Chinese loan). US\$8.77 billion is lent by Chinese state-owned commercial banks, including the China Development Bank, the Bank of China, and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC). A large part of Chinese debt comes under CPEC.<sup>93</sup> Pakistan's economic reliance on China and their strategic friendship is another challenge that may potentially limit Russia and Pakistan's engagement. However, Russia is getting closer to China, especially after the West's opposition to its invasion of Ukraine.

The US-Pakistan strategic relationship has waned over time, especially after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021, which significantly helped establish relations between Pakistan and Russia. However, Pakistan also borrows from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to support its weak economy. As of 13 May 2024, Pakistan owes US\$6.5 billion to the IMF.<sup>94</sup> The US, the largest donor of the IMF, can also impact the relationship between Russia and Pakistan to the extent that the US can leverage the IMF as a political tool against Pakistan to achieve its objectives. This may pose a challenge to the emerging relationship between Russia and Pakistan.

### **Discussion on Impending Challenges**

The likely scenario of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Russia can be explained by analysing the nature of the impending challenges discussed earlier in this paper. The nature of impending challenges is divided into complementary and non-complementary, as shown in Table 2. This sheds light on the challenges impeding the emerging relationship between Pakistan and Russia. The historic India-Russia and US-Pakistan relationships cast doubt on efforts to deepen cooperation between Russia and Pakistan. However, several factors are likely to undermine the challenges facing relations between Pakistan and Russia. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West has hit Russia with sanctions, and Russia has halted its energy supplies to Europe in return. It pushed Russia to look for partners in the east to fill the economic and political gap. In this regard, China replaces the West with its energy

needs and financial power. Therefore, despite being sceptical of China's growing influence in Central and South Asia, Russia will likely collaborate with China and its friend Pakistan, gradually slipping away from the US grip. Moreover, India's growing importance for the US-led West and its inclusion in security and strategic alliances such as the QUAD will impact the historic friendship between Russia and India. Nonetheless, these challenges will remain, albeit not threatening the emerging relationship between Russia and Pakistan, but the nature of these challenges is non-complementary. Therefore, both sides must consider these factors to proactively limit the impact of these impending challenges on improved bilateral relations.

**Table 2:** Overview of the Nature of Challenges Impeding Pakistan-Russia Relations

Challenges	Description	Nature
India-Russia relationship	Their historical relationship will influence Pakistan-Russia relations. Russia is sceptical of growing Chinese influence in Central and South Asia, particularly Pakistan's high reliance on China. This prevents Russia from distancing itself from India despite its growing strategic ties with the West. In this scenario, Pakistan may have difficulties establishing cordial relations with Russia.	Non-Complementary
US-Pakistan relationship	Russia faces a dilemma in establishing relations with Pakistan because of the historical Pak-US relations. Pakistan's ruling elite and military intelligentsia are prone to the US, given that their education and businesses are in the US and Europe.	Non-Complementary
Pakistan's Reliance on China and IMF	Russia sceptically sees Pakistan's economic dependence on China and IMF, which may impact the relations based on mutual interest.	Non-Complementary

## Conclusion

The region's geopolitical landscape suggests that Pakistan and Russia must work together. Both nations have previously squandered similar chances. They do not share borders, though. Nevertheless, both were hampered by the effects of the regional instability. Thus, they needed to work together to overcome the obstacle brought on by the US abrupt exit from Afghanistan. Furthermore, institutional tools like JMCC, JMC, and JWG's would help close the trust gap between the two nations. The relationship trajectory demonstrates an upward trend in all areas of their cooperation—economic, defence, energy, and socio-cultural.

They initially inked the Security Training Agreement, allowing Pakistani military officers to get training from Russian military establishments. Furthermore, as evidence of their expanding regional relationship, they conducted several cooperative militaries, counterterrorism, and naval exercises, including AMAN and Friendship.

Economic relations need to reach their full potential even though they have improved. Pakistan can export raw materials, sports equipment, leather goods, and cotton to Russia. Pakistan might purchase Russian military hardware, metallurgy, and energy. Rapid urbanisation has led to an increase in Pakistan's energy needs. Currently, it imports gas from Qatar to make up for the shortfall. Consequently, Russia can supply Pakistan with energy, as the latter needs new markets following the sanctions imposed by the West over the Crimean issue. Before the restrictions, imports of Russian energy supplied 66% of Europe's energy needs.

Despite growing collaboration, Pakistan was only acknowledged in 2008 and not included in Russia's foreign policy conceptions for 2000, 2013, or 2016. Similarly, unlike other Asian nations like Afghanistan, China, and India, Putin did not include Pakistan in his 2012 article "Russia and the Changing World" or the National Security Strategy and the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation up to 2020.<sup>95</sup> It is a result of their mutual mistrust. No visit by any former Russian or Soviet presidents to Pakistan could be attributed to mistrust. Nevertheless, given Pakistan's strategic importance and sway over the Taliban, Russia cannot afford to ignore it. Working within an institutional framework benefits both countries because it maintains stable connections. Their tight interdependence is essential to protect and integrate Central, South, and West Asia. To this aim, both nations might consider regional issues through regional multilateral platforms like the SCO and BRICS.

The compelling opportunities support the idea of neoliberal institutionalism by evoking cooperation in several areas, from the economy to multilateral institutions. On the other hand, the challenges need to be monitored by enhancing institutional capacities to assuage them. This corresponds to the idea that both countries' emerging bilateral relationships are moving ahead.



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