**Pak-Russian relations**

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Pakistan’s objective national interests are best served by retaining its recently improved relations with Russia while simultaneously improving its troubled ties with the US. Neither should occur at the expense of the other since a balance between them is the most optimal scenario. The two latest developments suggest that the new authorities are seriously considering this pragmatic course of action but might have yet to decide on how to proceed. Russian-Pakistani relations have dominated the discourse in that South Asian state since former Prime Minister Imran Khan claimed that the US ousted him in early April as punishment for his independent foreign policy, particularly its Russian dimension. The new authorities, however, insist that their no-confidence motion against him was constitutional and therefore legal. Whatever side of the debate one stands on, there’s no denying that bilateral ties have been politicised after the latest events. Two recent developments indicate that Russia is sincerely interested in continuing its close cooperation with Pakistan despite the scandal that accompanied the new authorities’ rise to power. Their ties have thus far been characterised by joint anti-terrorist drills, political coordination in Afghanistan, and negotiations over agricultural and energy cooperation. They’re mutually beneficial and not aimed against any third parties. Moscow’s position towards all of its partners is that their relations should always be free from any external influences. In the context of ties with Islamabad, this means that the Kremlin expects that the possible improvement of Pakistani-American ties won’t negatively impact Pakistani-Russian ones.
Observers should keep this in mind when interpreting the report from The Express Tribune claiming that President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Sharif have quietly exchanged letters expressing their mutual desire to continue comprehensively cooperating with one another. That Pakistani outlet is regarded as a credible source of information so its report shouldn’t be dismissed out of hand. It claimed that a senior foreign office official from their country spoke to them on the condition of anonymity to reveal that “Putin expressed the desire to deepen cooperation between the two countries. PM Shehbaz wrote back to Putin thanking him for his felicitation message and expressed similar sentiments on bilateral ties between the two countries as well as cooperation on Afghanistan.” If true, then it’s a promising development which might put to rest some of the suspicions that the new authorities are operating under US influence or might even be completely controlled by the declining unipolar hegemon. The second event worth considering in this context is the Russian Embassy in Pakistan’s tweet on Thursday that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov congratulated Bilawal Bhutto on his appointment as the new Foreign Minister. This confirms Russia’s sincere interest in continuing to closely cooperate with Pakistan and adds credence to The Express Tribune’s report.
Analysing both developments back-to-back, it certainly seems like the new authorities are receptive to Russia’s recent outreaches. The reported exchange of letters between their leaders and Foreign Minister Lavrov’s public invitation to his Pakistani counterpart to visit Moscow suggest at the very least that baby steps are being taken to keep their ties on track despite the scandalous context in which they’re being practiced following early April’s change of government and the former premier’s speculation about the reason behind his ouster. This is a positive development that should be celebrated by both sides, but it would of course be best if these are actually signs of something bigger that might be in the works between them. To explain, bilateral relations are extremely promising and have the exciting potential to truly develop into a comprehensive strategic partnership with time. For that to happen, though, they must absolutely remain on track and mustn’t be slowed down whatsoever at all no matter how much the US might pressure Pakistan to do so. Pakistan’s objective national interests are best served by retaining its recently improved relations with Russia while simultaneously improving its troubled ties with the US. Neither should occur at the expense of the other since a balance between them is the most optimal scenario. The two latest developments suggest that the new authorities are seriously considering this pragmatic course of action but might have yet to decide on how to proceed. That’s somewhat understandable considering how politicised relations with Russia have become due to the scandal surrounding the recent change of government and speculation about what Pakistan might have to compromise on as a quid pro quo for improving ties with the US. Nevertheless, it’s still a positive step in the right direction that baby steps are at least being taken to ensure that relations with Russia aren’t harmed by what just transpired in the country. It remains to be seen whether the pace of their previously rapid rapprochement with Russia will continue, but it doesn’t look like their prior progress will be reversed barring some unexpected development. That being the case, Pakistan should be praised for not abandoning the Russian vector of its grand strategy, which will hopefully continue to strengthen.