**New beginning in Pakistan-Russia relations**

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Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Mr. Sergey Lavrov was in Islamabad for a two-day official visit. The stop-over followed nine long years, as there was no high-level visit from Moscow since 2015. The stay was dubbed a “new chapter” in Pakistan-Russia relations. This was the reflection of Russia’s inclination towards Pakistan, especially after the recent Afghan Peace meeting hosted by Moscow, as well as India’s growing tilt towards the US in various counter-China and Russia initiatives. The Russian Foreign Minister was received from airport by his counterpart, Shah Mahmood Qureshi. He conducted delegation-level talks with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan to later meet Prime Minister Imran Khan and Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa. During these meetings, the discussions focused on the issues of economic, strategic and military cooperation as well as on regional dossiers. Sergey Lavrov was accompanied by the Russian Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov. While speaking to the joint press conference, the Russian foreign minister expressed the Russian urge to further collaboration with Pakistan in the fields of defense, security and energy. He has also highlighted Russia’s desire to offer Pakistan special military equipment and help with its counter-terrorism efforts. There is a growing trend in the bilateral Pakistan–Russia diplomatic, political, economic and military ties. Russia is an important partner for Pakistan, especially given the rapidly changing political and strategic regional power dynamics. Both countries share a commonality of approaches towards the regional and global issues including Afghanistan. The latter is an important priority area of mutual concern, where both countries share their apprehension about the deteriorating security situation with the gradual rise of terrorist activities. During this important path-shaping visit, there were discussions about taking the North–South Gas pipeline project forward and assisting Pakistan in upgrading the Pakistan Steel Mill to pull it out of the current financial crisis. Russia is also supporting Pakistan’s fight against the COVID-19 virus especially by the rapid supply of Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine. Before coming to Pakistan, the Russian Foreign Minister paid a 19-hour-only visit to New Delhi for meetings with high officials where he held extensive talks on the various aspects, including finalizing the details on the approaching annual India-Russia Summit.

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The visit occurred once Russia hosted a one-day regional peace conference, the “expanded troika”, in Moscow, inviting Pakistan, the US, China and facilitating dialogue between the Ghani-led Afghan government and the Taliban. This was a rare meeting where China, Russia, US, Pakistan and other countries were on the same page regarding Afghanistan. Russia, an important regional power, is playing its role in facilitating the contradictory parties in Afghanistan to come to agreement, especially to end the civil war in Afghanistan, on the basis of inclusive dialogue. Pakistan and Russia anticipate a possibility of another such meeting, especially in the background of finding lasting peace for Afghanistan. One more Afghan-specific meeting is upcoming, with Turkey holding a peace conference related Afghan peace process on April 24 where Taliban have refused to attend. On the other hand US has finally announced withdrawal of its forces by September 11 nearly 20 years of its invasion. This was beyond the May 1 withdrawal deadline announced by the Trump administration. The delay was disappointing, as one of the major demands of the Afghan insurgents were about the withdrawal of foreign forces from the Afghan soil. Given the potential upsurge of violence that the Afghans might face in the post US troops withdrawal scenario, there is a sense of urgency and pressing desire from all the countries in the region to play their active and positive role in supporting the peace process. Intra-Afghan peace talks began last year in Doha where the Afghan government and the Taliban commenced their peace talks. The progress is, however, lethargic as violence has increased in the country. Heart-Of Asia-Istanbul Process Ministerial meeting was held in Dushanbe where the emphasis again was to find urgent settlement of the Afghan issue.

During the visit of the Russian Foreign Minister, there was a desire to finalize the North – South Gas pipeline that has been renamed by both sides last year in November as the “Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) Project.” Apart from renaming the pipeline, there is little further agreement about the distribution of shares where the official estimates suggest that Russian side will acquire 26 per cent of the shares from this project. Islamabad will look after the Pakistani side of interests, while Moscow will handle the logistics and financial affairs. The project is estimated to cost around 2 billion USD with an annual capacity to transport 12.4 billion cubic feet of gas from Karachi to the north of the country. In order to meet the growing energy demands, the government of Pakistan has in 2015 signed an intergovernmental agreement with Russia to construct this 800 km long pipeline passing through Sindh, Punjab and then taking the eastward route. The initial point of this gas pipeline is closer to Nawabshah in Sindh and then end at Nankana Sahib in Punjab. This has been on the standstill due to the tough US sanctions against the Russian state company Rostekh. This is one of the largest investment infrastructure collaborations between Pakistan and Russia since the former Soviet Union helped build the iconic Pakistan Steel Mills Industrial Complex at Port Qasim. It is expected that the pipeline will be operational by July this year. Pakistan is one of the lucrative markets for energy needs, as the domestic gas demand has increased due to massive ongoing industrialization, making Pakistan to search new sources. This important project will help Pakistan to fulfill its energy needs in a better manner.. It is important to note here that this pipeline will provide an exceptional market to the Russian companies and will help improve the demand for non-oil exports.

In terms of strategic cooperation, Russia will be supporting Pakistan in acquiring new military equipment to boost Pakistan’s potential to fight terrorism. The Russian Foreign Minister also announced joint military and maritime exercise to fight the piracy. Both countries are working together in various regional and global forums and actively collaborate at the regional level within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where Pakistan and Russia share similarities of interest. Both countries have deep-rooted military and strategic ties, with Russia selling its military equipment to Pakistan. During the recent discussions, the Russian Foreign minister said that both Pakistan and Russia are ‘facilitating’ and supporting the inclusive dialogue to end violence in the country. Russia also hosted several meetings of the extended “troika” important initiative related to Afghanistan as one such consultation was held on March 18, 2021. In this meeting representatives from Russia, China, US and Pakistan along with representatives from High Council for National Reconciliation, important Afghan political figures and Taliban representatives were present. Turkey and Qatar were guests of honor during these talks. Earlier Troika meetings were held on 22 March, 25 April, 11 July and 25th October 2019 and later due to COVID there were digital online consultations held in June and later in November 2020. Both Pakistan and Russia support Afghan led and Afghan owned peace process for regional peace and stability hence playing their important role.

In the rapidly changing international and regional security milieu, Pakistan is adjusting and exploring new avenues for new alliances and relationships to secure its regional and global interests. The new phase in relations between Pakistan and Russia has been ushered with this important visit. It is important for Pakistan to build lasting partnership with Russia to deal with regional and global challenges.

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