**Russia-Pakistan Ties and New Great Game**

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February 4, 2023

Pakistan and Russia have done a lot in recent decades to mitigate their bitterness of the Cold War era when Pakistan was pitched as a frontline state to block Moscow’s headway to warm water. Islamabad’s grave experiences with Washington in the post-Afghan war period and its subsequent isolation pushed it closer to Russia. Though initially sceptical, the latter also found a niche in developing relations with Pakistan. Pressed hard by costly oil imports from Gulf countries in recent months, Pakistan found the low-cost Russian crude oil very tempting. Pakistan’s Minister of State for Petroleum Musadik Malik visited Moscow in late November last year and on return, he announced that modalities for an oil import deal would be worked out at the 8th session of the Russia-Pakistan Inter-Governmental Commission to be held later in Islamabad.

The IGC, in its three-day session in mid-January, did not finalize any deal on energy. But Nikolay Shulginov, Russia’s Energy Minister, did say that both sides had agreed in principle on the matter and details will be worked out by March.

“As for the supply of crude oil and petroleum products, we conceptually agreed on the development and signing of an agreement that will determine and resolve all issues of logistics, insurance, payment, volumes,” Shulginov told media at the conclusion of the session. Besides the energy import, the IGC also discussed cooperation in trade, economics, science and technology. Three agreements were signed for boosting cooperation in the customs and aviation sectors.

Later Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari visited Moscow last week holding ‘constructive talks’ with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, at which they agreed to pursue initiatives to deepen cooperation in various fields, including economy, energy, education and connectivity. They also discussed the regional situation, particularly Afghanistan and cooperation at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

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Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, in her weekly press briefing this Thursday, said during their talks Bhutto and Lavrov agreed to further enhance cooperation in the areas of trade, energy, education, culture, security and counter-terrorism.

“They agreed on the importance of regular high-level exchanges and to continue bilateral dialogue mechanisms to explore mutually beneficially cooperation,” she recalled, adding that the two Foreign Ministers also discussed global and regional issues, especially South Asia and Afghanistan.

Pakistan and Russia are, for years, pursuing a cooperative relationship in defence, security and counter-terrorism. In 2016, the two sides signed an agreement under which Russia supplied four MI-35M helicopter gunships along with related equipment in 2017. Forces of the two countries have also conducted joint military and counter-terrorism exercises. Apart from bilateral cooperation, Afghanistan has become a special point of convergence between the two countries in recent months. After the induction of the Taliban government, engagement has further increased between Pakistan and Russia regarding Afghanistan. Both countries are apprehensive of the accelerated activities of the Islamic State-Khorasan, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and other terrorist groups functioning in Afghanistan. While Russia’s interests in the neighbouring Central Asian states are facing a security threat from Afghanistan, Pakistan is also feeling threatened by the presence of the TTP across its western border.

Pakistan and Russia, along with the Central Asian states, fear the backlash of any political and economic instability in Afghanistan that might have direct bearings for them. Neither Moscow nor Islamabad officially recognizes the Taliban government. But they do urge the regional and world countries to engage with the ‘interim Afghan government’ to check the further deterioration of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Both have repeatedly asked the United States to release the frozen assets of Afghanistan.

After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the Central Asian states have been constantly trying to promote trade and transit relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The economically-strained Pakistan is also seeking to explore the Central Asian markets for diversification of its trade. The Ukraine war and the resultant sanctions, which have rendered Russia almost cut off from Europe, have compelled Moscow to divert its economic, trade and energy channels from Europe to Central Asia. An unstable and volatile Afghanistan would not only hamper connectivity among all these regional countries but may also pose a setback to their economic development.

There are signs that after the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan in 2021, the United States is again contemplating its return to the region not only to promote its interests in the region but also to check Russia and China, which are constantly trying to fill the vacuum created by the United States.

Pakistan has traditionally remained a close ally of the United States and it continues to nurture good relations with Washington and other Western partners. Therefore, it is but natural for China and Russia to grow suspicions over its loyalties. For its part, Pakistan claims impartiality and says it wants good relations with all sides.

“We equally value our relations with Russia, the United States, and Europe,” answered a Foreign Office spokesperson when asked in her weekly press briefing. She said Pakistan is having constructive dialogue with Russia, Europe and the United States.

The present age of economic convergences might help unite the Eurasian supercontinent for the benefit of all regional countries provided the rampant speculations about a new Great Game focusing on Pakistan and Afghanistan do not let loose an inferno in the region.

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