[**Outreach to Russia**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1733349/outreach-to-russia)

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A RUSSIAN delegation has recently visited Islamabad to explore the possibility of the ‘seamless’ flow of energy from Russia to Pakistan. It is not yet clear if energy supplies would be provided at a discounted rate. Nor is it decided how and in which currencies the payments would be settled. Apparently, it is just the beginning of the process and details are being worked out. Yet, this should be seen as a welcome development as it is in keeping with Pakistan’s policy of engaging with all major powers based on our national interests. However, it would be premature to celebrate because energy supplies are still months away, and that too if the details are negotiated successfully.

Russia is a resource-rich country but the West’s stringent sanctions have obliged it to turn to Asian states to sell its energy surpluses. Reports indicate that Moscow offered heavy discounts on oil sales to India, which grabbed the opportunity. China, too, availed of this lucrative offer and boosted its oil (and LNG) imports from Russia.

Naturally, the US and Europe, which are trying to build pressure on the Russian leadership for invading Ukraine, are upset as their carton of unprecedented sanctions against Russia is being punctured. The US has expressed concern over high-seas oil transfers to avoid sanctions. However, given its larger strategic objectives in Asia, which require India to be a partner of choice, the US has not adopted any measure to restrict Russian energy exports to India or other countries in Asia. This flexibility has worked for India, China and other Asian countries, including Pakistan, which is exploring the option of getting Russian oil now and LNG later.

Apart from the economics of it, there are strategic and political aspects of the Ukraine crisis that merit a closer look. Both India and China had taken a guarded position on Russian aggression against Ukraine. Pakistan, too, abstained on the UN resolution that condemned the aggression. Two views prevail in Pakistan. Some are convinced that Moscow was provoked by the West’s attempts to bring Nato to Russia’s borders. Others feel that Russia’s invasion and occupation of a part of Ukrainian territory was a violation of the territorial integrity of a smaller neighbour. While Pakistan has already taken the position of abstaining on the UN resolution, it would be important to watch out for any move that could cause the Russian military act set a precedent for larger countries to invade smaller neighbours.

Pakistan has done well to engage with Russia.

On balance, our diplomacy has created space for Pakistan to engage with Russia for the supply of energy on discounted rates without compromising our ties with the US and Europe. However, given the historical context, we should be, at best, cautiously optimistic.

Pakistan and Russia have never had a strategic alignment of interests. India was always the preferred partner for Russia. Pakistan was allied with the US during the Cold War. During Bhutto’s time, relations began to improve and Russia helped establish the Pakistan Steel Mills in 1973. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 poured cold water on any possibility of collaboration. During the 1990s, US sanctions on Pakistan triggered fresh thinking in the country, but despite a high level of diplomatic activity, the political and economic content of the relationship remained limited.

In 2014, the two countries decided to pick up the threads, focusing on defence cooperation, signing a defence cooperation deal, buying assault helicopters and participating in joint military and naval exercises. A major reason for the uptick in ties was that, following America’s close strategic partnership with India, Russia opted for a more balanced approach towards South Asia. This was not a pull-back from India but an attempt to diversify its options. Secondly, Pakistan is a prospective market for Russian military equipment and investments. Instability in Afghanistan also required closer coordination between the two countries.

Yet, the relationship did not grow fast enough. A major reason limiting Pakistan-Russia ties has been India. Secondly, Pakistan’s relationship with Russia is not broad-based. Economic relations could not take off. The North-South gas corridor the two states agreed to build in 2015 and that was to be completed by 2018 is still in limbo. Bilateral trade has been modest.

Given Western sanctions and the Ukraine crisis, Russia’s economic and political outreach to Asian countries is a strategic imperative for it. Pakistan has done well by engaging with Russia while maintaining constructive ties with all major powers based on the mutuality of interests. It must not give up this strategic autonomy, especially in pursuit of its economic interests.

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