**Ties with Russia**

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Russia is the largest country on the globe, with about 11 per cent of the world land mass, nearly double the size of the United States. Russia’s main expansion took place in the later half of the 16th century when they annexed an extensive geographical region of Siberia. Russia’s population is close to 150 million and the country’s strength lies in its land mass, resilient population, and strong armed forces which are equipped with the world’s largest stockpile of 5977 nukes and 1588 missiles.

Russia’s main strength, however, lies in its energy resources as it is the largest supplier of gas and second largest supplier of crude oil in the world. Its economic strategy is based on a mixed concept of controlled and free market economies and the Russian economy is the fourth largest in Europe and 11th largest in the world.

Pakistan badly needs the best of socio-economic, political and military ties with all regional countries – especially with energy superpower Russia. However, Russia-Pakistan relations suffered a setback when in the very first decade of our independence we failed to keep an optimum balance in our diplomatic ties with both the superpowers of the time: the US and (former) Soviet Union. Allowing American anti-Soviet spy planes to operate from the Badaber PAF base located near Peshawar further aggravated the situation.

This notwithstanding, the Soviet Union later tried to play a neutral role in the 1965 Indo-Pak war and facilitated both countries to finalize the Tashkent Declaration. Unfortunately, however, the former Soviet Union continued to support India on the Kashmir dispute and provided India assistance during the 1971 India-Pak war. The Soviet Union made a positive gesture in the mid-seventies when they signed a contract to establish a steel mill in Pakistan. Bilateral ties however again got aggravated when Pakistan played a pivotal role in thwarting Soviet aggression in Afghanistan which culminated in a humiliating Soviet defeat (1979-89).

After the end of the Soviet Union, especially after the dawn of the 21st century, the global financial centre of gravity started shifting from the West to the East and with that international geostrategic environments also started witnessing a transformation. Russia and China came close to each other; the SCO was formed; India gradually started slipping into the American camp and finally became a strategic ally; Covid badly affected the world economy; and Nato’s eastward gradual expansion culminated in the Ukraine war which inter alia created a world energy crisis.

Russia also started to extend its influence eastward. This provided a golden chance to Pakistan to improve its bilateral ties with Russia. As a result of this, we got some MI-17 helicopters, joint military exercises were conducted and later we also got a few more MI-35 helicopters. Currently, a $2.5 billion worth Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) project is in progress which will lay a 1100 km gas pipeline from Karachi to Kasur.

The 8th session of the Pakistani-Russian Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) on trade, economic and science and technology cooperation was held last month in Islamabad. And the Pakistan-Russia Business Council (PRBC) of the FPCCI is actively seeking purposeful interaction with Russia’s business community and they have also signed some MoUs. The G-to-G signing of an MoU for supply of crude oil and gas is however the biggest breakthrough which quickly needs to be translated into a formal contract. It is being estimated that about 35 per cent of the 70 m barrel annual Pakistani crude oil requirement will be met by importing Russian oil at subsidized rates.

Pakistan’s foreign minister’s recent visit to Russia further reinforced bilateral ties. Areas of further cooperation with Russia can also be explored. First, we need to discuss and finalize issues pertaining to currency swap, barter trade and managing a safe trade route through Afghanistan – maybe through a tunnel under the very narrow Wakhan Corridor created as a buffer between Russia and British India in 1895. Its minimum depth is nine miles and it can be a safe land route to Russia through CARs – of course with the consent of the Afghan government for which they should get suitable royalty. It will also be very beneficial for Russia as it has no warm water sea port close by. Refining Russian crude oil will not be a problem as out of our five refineries we can use two for Russian crude oil processing.

Pakistan must also use the SCO forum for its trade ties not only with Russia but also with CARs and get the TAPI project expedited. Third, to create conducive regional environments for desired economic activities Russia can be requested to play an objective role for the solution of the Kashmir dispute as per UN resolutions and bring a semblance of stability in Afghanistan. Russia should also be encouraged to join CPEC which can provide it much needed access to warm water ports.

Lastly, Russia-Pakistan cooperation can open vast opportunities in defence production, IT, railway infrastructure, agriculture research, tourism and the steel sector.

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