

# Shifting Spheres of Influence: The Next Phase of the Russia-Pakistan Rapprochement

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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*The next logical phase of the Russian-Pakistani rapprochement is the comprehensive expansion of people-to-people ties via the creation of a Russian Friendship Center in Islamabad and other creative outreach initiatives.*

The [Russian-Pakistani rapprochement](#) is proceeding at a comfortable pace on the state-to-state level, with both Great Powers achieving [win-win outcomes](#) in regards to their [Afghan peace initiative](#) and [transregional energy cooperation](#), but their recently renewed relations are fast approaching the point where it'll be necessary to expand them to the crucial realm of people-to-people ties in order to develop the incipient partnership into a strategic one. To that end, it's suggested that the following interconnected set of proposals be initiated by the Russian side in order to assist with this task:

## **Build A Russian Friendship Center In Islamabad**

Moscow needs to show Pakistanis that Russia serious about its rapprochement with their country, and there's no better way of doing this than to build a Friendship Center in Islamabad. This facility is envisioned to function as the cornerstone of Russian-Pakistani relations due to its multidimensional purpose in comprehensively serving as the bridge between these two Great Powers' Eurasian civilizations. There will of course be a cultural wing that's become the standard in these sorts of institutions, but the center should also importantly include a registrar of Russian and Pakistani businesses in order to better pair one up with the other and therefore accelerate economic relations.

More will be said about the means through which these new partners are expected to trade with one another in the next section, but for now some additional words need to be said about the other suggested features of the Friendship Center.

Apart from its cultural and economic components, it should also include hands-on scientific and technological exhibitions showcasing the most impressive inventions in Russia's Imperial, Soviet, and post-communist history and the brightest minds behind them, which could thus allow the institution to become a field trip destination for Pakistani students. Speaking of which, the proposed center should also be partnered with Russian and Pakistani universities – or perhaps be accredited as its own with official recognition in both countries – in order to cultivate a new generation of elite to cement the partnership between these two states. Accordingly, Russian language classes could naturally be offered to interested individuals of all ages, which would help Pakistanis communicate with their Central Asian civilizational cousins once CPEC enables their integration with time.

Lastly, a conference center should be built on the premises, too, and it should be

understood by Moscow that this Friendship Center isn't just Russia's interface with Pakistan, but its de-facto headquarters for engaging [all of CPEC's partners](#), including its Mideast and African ones who will predictably conduct more of their Chinese-destined trade through this corridor.

### **Connect To CPEC Via Kazakhstan, Siberia, And Iran**

The enhanced trade relations that were mentioned above can only occur if Russia and Pakistan are connected to one another through CPEC, no matter how indirectly due to the geographic distance between them and Moscow's reluctance to officially endorse this trade route in order to preserve its strategic "[balancing act](#)" with India. The second part of this conditional [implies](#) that the private sector needs to drive these two countries' CPEC connectivity since the Russian state isn't going to do so because of delicate political reasons, which thus allows one to envision three possible solutions, all of which are inclusive of one another and could in theory exist concurrently.

The most probable of the three is that Russia could connect to CPEC via the Central Asian state of Kazakhstan, which has already a member of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union and through which a lot of bilateral trade already traverses. Furthermore, the Eurasian Land Bridge between East Asia and Western Europe is expected to pass through this international corridor as well, so it'll probably be easiest for Russia and Pakistan to trade across this route by linking up at CPEC's Urumqi hub in China's Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

Considering that Xinjiang's capital city is located closer to Russia's southern Siberian border than to CPEC's terminal Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, there's also the chance that a more direct north-south trade route could be established between Russia and Pakistan via this avenue. After all, Russia's "Pivot to Asia" (which is officially referred to as "rebalancing" in Moscow's political parlance) isn't just international but also internal, and it aspires to develop resource-rich Siberia just as much as it aims to chart new international partnerships. With this in mind, there's no reason why southern Siberia couldn't one day be connected to CPEC via the nearby Urumqi juncture.

Lastly, Russia's already building a North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) through Azerbaijan and Iran in order to facilitate trade with India, so the opportunity exists for it to simply use this route's overland transport infrastructure to reach Pakistan in the event that the Iranian terminal port of Chabahar is ultimately linked with nearby Gwadar. Even if that doesn't happen, then there's still nothing preventing private Russian businessmen from using Chabahar or even the more developed port of Bandar Abbas as their base of operations for conducting maritime trade with Gwadar or Karachi. This would in effect make India's "brainchild" the ironic basis for Russian-Pakistani economic relations.



### **Encourage Trade Between Tatarstan And Pakistan**

Russia's historically Muslim region of Tatarstan has traditionally functioned as the country's point of contact with the international Islamic community, or "Ummah", ever since the end of communism, and this oil-rich autonomous republic could also help spearhead bilateral trade with Pakistan too. For reasons of civilizational similarity and cultural comfort, it might be easier for Tatars to make deals with Pakistanis than it could be for ethnic and Orthodox

Russians, which has already proven to be the case at least when it comes to the successful business relationship between Tatars and their [Arab counterparts in the Gulf](#).

The focus needs to be on Tatarstan driving non-energy investments and trade ties with Pakistan that involve the commercial, industrial, and service dimensions of the real-sector economy in order to add a tangible substance to Russian-Pakistani relations that the average citizen in both countries could experience. Moreover, the diversification of economic relations between these two Great Powers and increased Russian investment in Pakistan could give Moscow a more comprehensive physical stake in the South Asian state that could in turn serve as the plausible pretext for it to get more diplomatically involved in “balancing” regional affairs.

### **Medical Diplomacy**

One of the most ingenious moves that Moscow could make in adding a personal touch to its rapprochement with Pakistan would be to engage in “medical diplomacy” as a complement to its existing “[military](#)”, “[energy](#)”, and “[nuclear](#)” diplomatic toolkits. In this context, Russia could coordinate with Pakistan in either dispatching teams of doctors to the Afghan border or building a Russian-operated hospital in the frontier city of Peshawar to care for the populations there and provide humanitarian assistance to some of the millions of Afghan “refugees” (migrants) who inhabit the nearby environs.

Not only would Russian soft power surge in Pakistan, but it could virally spread across the border into Afghanistan by word of mouth after countless numbers of its citizens inform their family and friends about how Russian doctors treated them with dignity for little or no cost prior to their repatriation back home. Kabul has been incensed at Islamabad’s [insistence](#) on returning Afghan “refugees”, but if these individuals were given decent medical care by Russia before their departure, then it might help sooth some of the simmering resentment between the two neighbors and ultimately break the ice between them.



Russian mobile hospital in Syria

### **Film A CPEC Documentary**

The most effective way to inform the masses in each country about the fast-moving rapprochement between their governments and the seriousness with which they’re dedicated to making it as all-inclusive as possible is for popular Russian and Pakistani journalists to film a CPEC documentary. This wouldn’t be about the mega projects underway in the country like mostly every other similar initiative is geared towards, but would see the program hosts take a road trip through Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, and Russia (or via the reverse route) in showing their audiences the connectivity potential of CPEC.

Along the way, they could film the most noteworthy tourist sites and conduct interviews with the locals, all with the intent of demonstrating how CPEC is driving continental integration and fulfilling President Putin’s recently announced grand strategic vision of the [Greater Eurasian Partnership](#) between the Eurasian Economic Union and China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. Furthermore, the journalists could visit the Russian Friendship Center in Islamabad, report on Tatar investments in Pakistan, and even do a feature on the prospective Russian hospital in Peshawar, to say nothing of covering complementary Pakistani projects inside of Russia.

The end result of this information product should be made available in Russian, Urdu, Mandarin, Farsi, and English versions so that as wide of a relevant audience as possible can become acquainted with it.

## **Cordially Compete With China**

Russia and Pakistan are both high-level and full-spectrum strategic partners with China, and all three countries are in the same “Community of Common Destiny” with one another, as Beijing likes to frame its OBOR relationships nowadays, but Moscow and Islamabad are a lot closer to one another in a structural sense than initially meets the eye because they’re in the same position relative to Beijing. Each of them is involved in a signature OBOR project, be it CPEC that traverses Pakistan or the Eurasian Land Bridge that will eventually do the same with Russia (and Kazakhstan), and both Chinese-neighboring Great Power transit states have similar concerns about playing “second fiddle” to the Middle Kingdom in the future.

Whether unfounded or not, the fact remains that this somewhat convincing narrative has become an issue in Russia and especially Pakistan, and that it’s no longer possible for the authorities to completely ignore it. Instead of caving in to the demagogic-driven and US-encouraged reaction of “condemning” China or pulling out of various elements of their OBOR partnerships with it, these two countries could much more constructively utilize any intensification of their bilateral economic relations in order to boost the other’s negotiating leverage and help them bargain for a better win-win deal with Beijing. **The proposed approach is mostly applicable to the third-party role that Russia could play in Pakistan, whereby the cordial competition that it could engage in with China on some projects would give Islamabad more options than it has at present.**

This isn’t anything different than what China is already doing in Russia’s traditional “sphere of influence” in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, where Beijing sometimes offers up better terms to the local stakeholders than Moscow does and accordingly wins the deal instead. The final outcome is to everyone’s benefit, especially the host state’s, because it drives down costs and increases quality as a result of the cordial competition between these two strategically aligned Great Powers. This is a dynamic that Pakistan could leverage for its own domestic political reasons if it succeeds in incentivizing Russian businesses (possibly beginning with those based in Tatarstan) to enter its marketplace, and both Islamabad and Moscow would gain by cooperating with one another in working to equalize their Silk Road relationships with Beijing.

*This article was inspired by a week of detailed brainstorming with **Major Ahmad Rauf** during the author’s latest visit to Pakistan.*

**Andrew Korybko** is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China’s One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare.

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### About the author:

Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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