

Towards A Russia-Pakistan “Relationship”? In Defiance of Washington

By [Farooq Yousaf](#)

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Presidents Asif Ali Zardari and Dmitry Medvedev meeting in Moscow in May 2011

Pakistan-Russia ties are witnessing a fresh start with Russian President Vladimir Putin's expected visit, as quoted by Pakistan media in early October, the first visit by a Russian president to Pakistan. Something considered improbable in the past may soon become a reality as both sides are striving for a new start in bilateral ties.

Although Russian state media has cast doubts on Putin's visit, yet it is obvious that even if the visit is cancelled another high level official, such as the foreign minister, will visit Pakistan.

The visit, primarily intended for a quadrilateral Afghan conference in Islamabad, would also include a one-on-one meeting with the president of Pakistan.

It is reported by Russian Foreign Ministry officials that both states would also sign multiple MOU's (Memorandums of Understanding) on development and investment in the steel and energy sectors of Pakistan. President Asif Ali Zardari, while meeting with a high-level Russian delegation to Pakistan in early September headed by the Russian sports minister, expressed his desire for cooperation with Moscow in the aforementioned sectors.[i]

Historically, Russia and Pakistan have never enjoyed prolonged periods of fruitful ties. Even after Pakistan's inception, Liaqat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first prime minister, preferred to visit the USA, even though invited first by the then Soviet government. Relations saw their only major high during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government, when on his visit, in 1974[ii], the Soviet government agreed to establish the Pakistan Steel Mill at its own expense, coupled with helping in the nuclear energy sector.

It was during the Zia-ul-Haq regime when the Carter administration of the USA, Saudi Arabia and General Zia teamed up with the help of right-wing parties to train the Mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan[iii].

Keeping in context Pakistan's current political situation, the latest developments hold the utmost importance for the country. Currently, the United States and its allies have increased pressure on Pakistan to force support for Washington's policy of strengthening its influence in the region, despite the apparent contradiction with the national interests of Pakistan. Along with that, the USA is also losing its influence in the region because of growing anti-US sentiment. That is why increased cooperation on a bilateral basis and within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will help address political and economic

issues in Pakistan. This in turn will provide additional opportunities to Islamabad for a more independent foreign policy and lesser economic dependence on the United States and international financial institutions, apparently controlled by the US[iv].

Washington's current policy and politics in the Afghan war seem to be aimed at diminishing the impact of Islamabad in the country and the peace process, and increasing the role of India in resolving the crisis[v]. Unsurprisingly, officials in Kabul also show an unfriendly attitude towards Pakistan, which is reflected in regular accusations against the Pakistani leadership regarding support of the Haqqani Network and other extremist organizations operating within Pakistan[vi] [vii] [viii].

With the current financial and strategic dependencies, Pakistan can only act as a mere spectator against US policies and demands. Only by increasing cooperation with China and Russia will a regional approach in addressing the Afghan issue and ensuring stability in the country help Pakistan protect its national interests.

It is obvious that positive ties with Russia would not only give strategic strength to Pakistan but would also provide a good opportunity for overcoming the country's energy woes coupled with enhancing regional trade and cooperation.

In the context of military cooperation, Air Chief Marshall, Tahir Rafiq Butt, visited Moscow in August, and termed his visit a significant development towards greater cooperation with Russia in the field of defence, particularly in air defence. It was also reported in the beginning of September that the Pakistan Army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, was also scheduled to visit Moscow for a high-level meeting with his Russian counterpart. This visit could be of huge significance as it points towards a major policy shift. A foreign office spokesman in Islamabad, on condition of anonymity, said:

“We have turned a new page in our relationship with Russia. It is a major shift”[ix]

Pakistan is an active member of the world community in combating terrorism and cross-border crime. Taking into account this special significance and the negative publicity it gathers from the world media even after making all its efforts and sacrifices, it would be useful to expand cooperation with the SCO states, especially Russia and China. This cooperation can also be in areas such as prevention and mitigation of natural and technological disasters, emergency management, training and development of local experts - in which Russia has rich experience - in regard to scientific and technical resources coupled with human and financial resources.

The current upturn in ties can be used to develop long-term economic cooperation with Russia. Moscow has expressed interest in participating in the construction of the TAPI (the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline), CASA-1000 (Central Asia South Asia Regional Energy and Trade) energy project and the Pakistan Steel Mill [x]. In this regard, Islamabad could prepare proposals for Moscow's participation in the implementation of major infrastructure projects in the country, leading to a positive development in bilateral relations.

Pakistan enjoys a great strategic edge, serving as a bridge and corridor to different regions. This also gives Russia an attractive spot to materialize its strategic depth. Therefore, ongoing developments between Moscow and Islamabad, high-level visits, and Pakistan's possible role in the SCO, signs for a greater South and East Asian alliance in the form of the

SCO, and an axis of a China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran partnership can bring positive omens not only to the region but also to the Asian continent as a whole.

Notes

[i]

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/434697/bold-move-russia-shows-interest-in-iran-gas-pipeline-project/>

[ii] <http://orientalreview.org/2011/05/25/warming-ties-with-russia/>

[iii] <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=3138>

[iv] http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2011-05/25/content_12576227.htm

[v] <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Security-Watch/Articles/Detail/?lng=en&id=143969>

[v i]

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9341684/Afghanistan-blames-Pakistans-intelligence-agency-for-Kabul-suicide-attack.html>

[v i i]

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/425065/kabul-blames-foreign-spy-agencies-for-insider-attacks/>

[viii] <http://tribune.com.pk/story/411902/kabul-blames-pakistan-for-cross-border-shelling/>

[i x]

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/430434/shift-in-policy-army-chief-to-make-historic-moscow-trip/>

[x] <http://www.lisauk.com/view.php?i=92>

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