Pakistan-Russia Relations: From Bitter Enemies to Geopolitical Partners

The gradual emergence of the multipolar world changes the international layout in a way that allows international players to maneuver, while compelling them to adjust the undertones of their foreign policies and adapt to the transforming realities.

Back during the Cold War years Pakistan and the USSR would typically be described as sworn enemies, as back in the day Pakistan was an important ally of the United States that permitted Washington to keep an eye on the USSR by allowing it to use its territory for all sorts of operations.

However, these days a convergence of strategic interests and a fast evolving environment in the world has brought Islamabad and Moscow closer than anybody could originally anticipated, which allows them to ignore certain bitter aspects of their past relationship.

It's been noted that last March, both capitals engaged in discussions for strengthening their strategic relationship, including potential Russian participation in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. They are also said to be seeking ways to increase trade and cooperation as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Of course, a mutual desire to build strong bilateral ties that both states demonstrate is guided by a number of common concerns in such spheres as energy and security. For instance, both Moscow and Islamabad share concerns over ongoing ISIS activities in the region and potential spread of extremism and drugs from Afghanistan. It's also been said that they are currently exploring a security partnership.

Yet, it's clear that without India that used to be a traditional Russian ally in the region gravitating closer to the US in its efforts to counter-balance China that New Delhi perceives as a long term adversary, Moscow wouldn't have an impetus to explore its options of rapprochement with Pakistan quite as eagerly.

It's been noted that India has been buying military hardware from Washington for quite some time now, which reduces its dependence on Russian weapons. This has cut into Russian arms market, since New Delhi has been Russia's biggest arms importer. India has also signed three out of four foundational agreements with the US and Russian experts are said to believe that India is drifting away from Russia towards the Americans.

Pakistan, on the other hand, is having a bad time with the US and is inclined to pursue better ties with Russia. Under President Trump, the US has tried to tighten noose around Pakistan holding it accountable for its support of terrorism. The US has also put an end to the annual transfers of 1.3 billion dollars in aid to Pakistan as it allegedly wants to force Islamabad into putting an end to the practice of providing safe heavens to various militant groups.

The relationships started to gain traction in 2014 – the year the United States began to withdraw NATO troops from Afghanistan. It was during that year that Russia lifted an arms embargo on Pakistan, paving the way for the two countries to sign a defence agreement.

Yet another development that affected Islamabad's desire to pursue a pro-Russian policy was last year's meeting of the Financial Action Task Force in Paris, that is described as an international body that is supposed to find ways to fight money laundering. The only reason why Islamabad managed to dodge the bullet back then was Russia's assistance, as it was clear that Washington was going to deliver a deafening economic blow to Islamabad. This situation was examined in much detail by The Express Tribune that would state:
Our so-called friends and old allies had tried very hard to declare us a terrorist state. This Damocles’ Sword had been hanging over our heads since long. If the FATF had succeeded in blacklisting us, Pakistan could have been rendered bankrupt.

Against the backdrop of these impending disasters and apocalyptic horrors of sorts, Khawaja Asif along with Tehmina Janjua reached Moscow.

Back then, Khawaja Astif was Pakistan's Foreign Minister that would meet with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov during those worrisome days for Pakistan, when Washington wanted to destroy it. It’s revealed that Lavrov was quick to rap his hand around the situation as he phoned his employee in Paris to announce that Russia was siding with Pakistan. The Pakistani media source says that this instantaneous support from the Russians touched the right chord in the hearts of senior Pakistani officials.

In the aftermath of this situation Khawaja Astif stated that:

We have been inimical to the Russians for 65 years. Despite this, they opened up their ‘sensitive doors’ for us. America did not even deign to give us any such access in 70 years. Ironically, our friends instead dragged us up to the threshold of excommunication and blacklisting. Whereas, those we considered our enemies have been standing with us at every world forum. That’s why I often ask what have we got from America in the past so many years?

Last May, Russia would staunchly defend Pakistan again, by announcing that Islamabad has the “sovereign right to take care of its security” amidst South Asia’s tit-for-tat missile tests. This unprecedented step, analysts argue, is a sign that the two states have reached a new level of cooperation.

As Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan announced at the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit, his country would want Moscow to allow it to purchase its newest military equipment. It shows that Russia and Pakistan took their strategic partnership to the next level with their recently agreed-to space pact committing each of them to do their utmost to prevent the militarization of space. This step looks even more significant if we take into consideration the fact that it was made after Trump’s announcement that Washington would want to get itself dragged into a new arms race in space.

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