

Improved Pakistan-Russia Relations: A Necessity for Stability in Eurasia

by Ramtanu Maitra

Feb. 16—The visit by Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar to Russia Feb. 7-9 has ushered in closer relations between the two countries, providing hope of much-needed regional stability at a time when U.S.-Britain-Qatar-Saudi Arabia-led forces are wreaking havoc throughout the Arab world and the Maghreb nations of North Africa. The crisis in the wider region has reached a boiling point and threats of war are looming. Russia and Pakistan, both nuclear weapons nations, are concerned about these developments, as are the other major nuclear powers in the region, China and India.

Traditionally, Pakistan has been aligned with the United States, and India with Russia. But military developments of the last few years, notably under the Obama Administration, are bringing about a shift with great strategic implications for the region, if it continues and is consolidated.

Improved Russia-Pakistan relations would not only benefit Russia and Central Asia, but would provide Pakistan an opportunity to break out of the circle of instability in which it is presently entrapped.

Pakistan's internal situation is highly fluid at this stage, with the Zardari Administration under pressure from within. Two major foes it faces are the judiciary and the military, and it is not yet clear which will win in this triangular power struggle. But, it is significant that in the midst of such instability, the foreign minister visited Moscow and concluded a number of significant agreements there. It also indicates an understanding in Moscow of the importance of playing a pro-active role in stabilizing Pakistan, and in the process, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Russian Interest in Development Projects

During Khar's visit, Russia indicated its keenness to take over the 1,640-km TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) gas pipeline project. The project, estimated to cost \$7.5 billion, had been hanging fire for years because of the geopolitical tussle between the United States, another interested party, and Russia.

The gas pipeline, backed by the Asian Development Bank, will bring 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day (bcfd) from Turkmenistan's gas fields to Multan in central Pakistan and will end in the northwestern Indian town of Fazilka. Originally scheduled to be completed by 2013-14, the landmark deal was signed by Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Indian Petroleum Minister Murli Deora,

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18/02/2012 20:25
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посетить ее страну с визитом

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МОСКВА, 8 фев - РИА Новости. Министр иностранных дел Пакистана Хина Раббани Кхар, находящаяся с официальным визитом в России, пригласила своего коллегу Сергея Лаврова.

RIA Novosti

Russian press coverage of the meeting between Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Feb. 8 in Moscow. RIA Novosti's headline reports that she has invited Lavrov to visit Pakistan. The visit is one indication of a shift underway in Pakistani foreign policy.



and President of the Asian Development Bank Haruhiko Kuroda in Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan, in 2010. But the instability in the region has kept the project frozen.

Russian investors have also expressed interest in the Thar coal project. This is quite an ambitious project for Pakistan, and will involve developing a large energy complex, to produce 6,000 MW of coal-based power and introduce to the energy-starved country the concept of gasification and production of liquid fuel from coal.

Thar is located in the eastern Sindh province and is part of the desert in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. It forms a natural boundary running along the border between India and Pakistan. Most of the desert lies in the Indian state of Rajasthan, and extends into the northern portion of Haryana and Punjab states and into southern Gujarat state. In Pakistan, the desert covers eastern Sindh and the southeastern portion of Punjab province.

According to available reports, the Thar coal project

is immensely valuable and viable. It is open-pit lignite coal-mining, and studies show net minable reserves of around 30 billion tons, covering around 1,000 square km. To put that in perspective, 100 million tons per annum of lignite coal could generate 15,000 MW of electricity.

Moscow has also shown interest in the Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline project, and has indicated to Islamabad that it wants Gazprom, the world's largest gas company, to have a role in the project. Pakistan has conveyed that it would welcome such Russian participation.

Foreign Minister Khar was told by her Russian counterpart that Moscow is also interested in participation in Pakistan's railroads, agriculture, and metallurgy. The two countries have been discussing the possibility of developing rail links with Iran and other areas in Central Asia, from Pakistan. Russia had shown some interest in Pakistan's desire to develop rail links to Central Asia from Gwadar Port, located on the Makran coast in southwest Baluchistan, close to the Strait of Hormuz.

Key Visits

It should be recognized that these developments could not have occurred through one successful visit. For the last two years, a number of high-level meetings between the leaders of these two countries have taken place.

Ajish Joy, of the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, in an article posted on the foundation's [website](#), "Russia and Pakistan Getting Closer" (May 2011) pointed out that President Zardari's May 2011 visit to Moscow was not just a one-time event. "Zardari and President Dmitri Medvedev had their first formal interaction in Dushanbe in June 2009, as part of the quadripartite meeting between the leaders of [Russia,] Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. In the second edition of this quadripartite meeting hosted by the Russian president in the Black Sea resort Sochi in June 2010, Zardari and Medvedev had another tête-à-tête. Following this, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had a one-to-one meeting with his Pakistani counterpart Yusuf Gilani at the SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization] Heads of Government Council in Tajikistan in November 2010. Zardari's latest visit, however, is more significant, as it is his first official stand-alone visit to Russia, and by raising the quality and quantity

of the bilateral exchanges with Pakistan, Russia is possibly signaling its intention to pursue a multi-vectored policy in South Asia.”

Another very important visit was that in April 2007 by then-Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, who now heads the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and who accompanied Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Syria recently. Fradkov’s pathbreaking 2007 visit took place soon after Russia had given the green light to China to use the Russian RD-93 engine for the JF-17 Thunder multi-role fighter aircraft that Beijing was developing. Subsequently, China sent 50 of these JF-17s to Pakistan, to the chagrin of India. During Fradkov’s visit, Pakistan and the Russian Federation signed two agreements: one on promoting cooperation in culture, arts, archaeology, archives, and movies; and the other on combating illicit trafficking and abuse of narcotics and psychotropic substances. More importantly, that visit initiated the possibility of a new chapter in the relations between the two countries.

Presidents Zardari and Medvedev have met six times since May 2011. During Zardari’s visit to Moscow at that time—the first by a Pakistani President since Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s trip in 1974—he invited Russia to use Pakistani territory to gain access to the Arabian Sea and beyond. According to him, this would contribute to prosperity in both countries. He told Medvedev: “Our countries are very close neighbors; we are located in the same region, and although we do not share borders, our hearts beat in unison.”

Russia has also offered Pakistan counter-terrorism equipment, reported Sajjad Shaukat in his January 2012 [article](#) at News Center PK, titled “New Era of Pak-Russia Relations”: “The package includes 10 MI-17 helicopters of unarmed configuration. When Russian [Commander in Chief of the Ground Forces] Col-Gen. Alexander Postnikov visited Pakistan in May 2011, he discussed with Army Chief Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani the possibility of expanding defense ties by holding joint military exercises, exchanging trainees and trainers, and selling and buying weapons. Moscow has also offered to sell the Sukhoi Superjet 100, a modern aircraft with a capacity of up to 95 passengers.”

Why are such agreements taking place now, after years of uneasy relations between the two? All the reasons are related to the unstable regional situation. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pakistan had played the U.S. game. The way

that the Pakistani military fought that proxy war on behalf of the United States not only corrupted the Pakistani military, but planted the seeds of a massive future upheaval in Pakistan. The Pakistani military, aiming to control Afghanistan, decided to disregard the danger, and as a result, brought the country to the brink of disaster. Pakistan’s democratic forces, who ruled in short stints in between the generals, either did not realize the danger, or ignored it for short-term financial gains.

Washington’s and London’s Use of Pakistan

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 created a crisis for the Pakistani military. They were now told by their distant ally, United States, to join hands to eliminate the mujahideen, who had been sponsored by Washington in the 1980s as “freedom fighters,” when they were fighting the Soviet Union and the Soviet-backed Mohammed Najibullah regime, until the Taliban was created to take over Afghanistan in 1996. The Pakistani military, under the leadership of President Pervez Musharraf, went along with the charade of pretending to eliminate the Taliban, while actually making sure that they were protected. This charade ran its course by 2009.

Around that time, fissures in the U.S.-Pakistani relationship became obvious. The Obama Administration, backed by Congress and dime-a-dozen Afghan experts in Washington, ignored the fissures and demanded from the Pakistani military what it had no intent to deliver. It was evident at the time that the relationship had run into a brick wall. Following the killing of sidelined Osama bin Laden in Pakistan last May, and the killing of at least 24 Pakistani soldiers by U.S. troops on Pakistani soil last November, Pakistan’s military lost its aura with the Pakistani people.

A few other complexities emerged along the way.

To begin with, the United States, which had its footprint in Pakistan, and was considered be a well-wisher of that country since the early days of the Cold War, has become the most hated nation in the world, to most Pakistanis. The anti-American mood has been fully exploited by the jihadis, controlled from Britain and Saudi Arabia. The process has engulfed quite a few in the higher echelons of Pakistani military as well. As a result, the Pakistani military’s strongest claim to credibility, the maintenance of law and order within the country, fell apart. Its headquarters came under attack, and vast damage was inflicted by the jihadis, who were working hand-in-glove with some Pakistani military officers at a naval base in southern

Pakistan soon after Osama bin Laden was killed by the U.S. Special Forces.

Years of misrule, or the distorted rule, took their toll on the economy. Although the United States was forking over some money to keep the Pakistani military brass in tow, the amount was never enough to trickle down to help the economy; that was not Washington's intent in any case. Pakistan's fragile infrastructure became further depleted. Major cities now undergo hours of power outages, and the principal commercial center, Karachi, teeming with 15 million people, became a victim of ruthless daily political violence.

The Pakistan-U.S. relationship now resembles pottery broken into many shards. No one knows which parts go where, and to mend the pottery would be a daunting task, which neither Washington nor Islamabad is capable of accomplishing.

To Become a Part of the Region

However, this crisis may have forced the Zardari Administration to look towards the region rather than to continue the game of charades with the Obama Administration. President Obama and his team always looked at Pakistan as a necessary evil that must be paid to get what Washington wants. The nature of this relationship with the United States has not only devastated Pakistan, it has made the region highly insecure and kept Pakistan from becoming integrated with the region. For decades now, Islamabad has played along with London and Washington.

There is no question that Pakistan's future lies in the region. Over the years, it has developed close working relations with China and has benefitted substantially from that relationship. Pakistan's nuclear power plants were provided by China, and Beijing is much interested in enhancing Pakistan's infrastructure. But as long as Pakistan plays second fiddle to London and Washington, its relations with China will remain limited. Tagging along with the London-Washington-led policy of seeking control over Afghanistan and Central Asia, not only made Pakistan a pariah nation in the region, but has made it a hot bed of extremism. The presence of Islamic terrorists of all varieties within Pakistan has made China cautious, and it is evident that Beijing will not involve Pakistan in its bigger schemes unless Pakistan makes serious efforts to turn the corner.

Russia too is concerned about the Islamic terrorists based in Pakistan, who commit violent acts in Central Asia and are linked to Russia's jihadi problems in

Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia. It is for that reason that in the June 2009 SCO summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, President Medvedev declared that "nests of terror" in Pakistan had to be eliminated as a priority. Therefore, the next step for Pakistan is to make its internal situation congenial for developing close cooperative relationships with Russia, China and India.


At the 10th SCO summit last November at Astana, Kazakhstan, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani sought Pakistan's full membership in the organization, whose profile and scope are of great importance because of the presence of China, Russia, and other Central Asian states. Currently Pakistan holds observer status, along with Mongolia, India, and Iran, whereas Sri Lanka and Belarus have been granted the status of dialogue partners, and Afghanistan is a special guest.

Russia has previously described the alliance as a regional alternative to NATO and discussed at past meetings the option of including other regional powers in its ranks. "We are talking about Pakistan and Iran, which have applied for membership," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters ahead of the talks. "India is also intent on joining, and Afghanistan has said it wants to be an observer."

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(1997) 260 pages **\$100**
(EIR 96-007)

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