



Pakistan-Russia Relations: The Afghanistan Factor

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Abstract:

Historically, Afghanistan has had a deep impact on Pakistan-Russia relations, though not positive. The prevalent geopolitical realities also suggest that Moscow and Islamabad have multiple avenues of cooperation for mutual benefits. The two countries have various similarities of interest vis a vis Afghanistan, which necessitate bilateral cooperation. The study elucidates the importance of Afghanistan in Pak-Russia bilateral relations. Both states have a couple of shared objectives vis a vis Afghanistan such as elimination of terrorism and extremism, end to violence, control of narcotics smuggling and promotion of regional connectivity. Realist theory provides an appropriate framework to conduct this study that also entails discussion on Russia's pursuit for maximization of power. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the war ravaged country had been facing critical situation with impending humanitarian crisis caused by shortage of food and medicine, recognition of the current Taliban government by the world and economic meltdown. Both Pakistan and Russia had appealed the world to stay engaged with the new Taliban government to avert humanitarian crisis. While Pakistan's historical alliance with the United States and Russia's traditional strong ties with India had been important factors in Pakistan-Russia ties, Afghanistan factor appeared to be a dominant factor.

Keywords: Pakistan, Russia, Afghanistan, bilateral relations, convergence of interests, alliance

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan-Russia relationship has always been seen through the prism of a third country; be it India or the United States or Afghanistan. Moscow's refusal to take into account India's objections to Pakistan-Russia first joint military exercises in 2016 indicated a relative exclusiveness in the Moscow-Islamabad ties; however, it cannot be stated even today that the two countries are moving ahead, though at a snail's pace, purely on the basis of their mutual interests. Even the closeness they have attained over the past two decades cannot be seen separately from the ever deepening India-US strategic partnership and volatile Pakistan-US ties. India's deepening ties with the United States have worried its traditional ally Russia. Moscow's engagement with Islamabad might be aimed at

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sending a message to India that it has some other options as well. However, Pakistan and Russia seems to be on the same side of geopolitical competition, and their improving ties reflect their responses to the changing geopolitical developments (Chia & Haiqi, 2021).

Pakistan's geostrategic location is highly important with respect to regional connectivity and trade routes among regions. Located at the hub of Central Asia, Middle East and South Asia, Pakistan provides a link between resource affluent Central Asia and energy scarce South Asia. As compared to Iran and Turkey, Pakistan offers the shortest route to China and Central Asia (Masood, Farooq & Hussain, 2016). Russia has a long held policy to reach warm waters of the Indian Ocean through Pakistan for having trade routes. This objective, among others, was behind the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. However, the decade-long blood fight led the USSR to shatter with economic collapse and balkanization. Even two decades after the Soviet collapse, Moscow's annexation of Crimea reflected the same policy of occupying regions for having diversified trade routes.

On the other hand, Pakistan wanted to enhance engagement with the powers having sway in Central Asia and South Asia. Pakistan's refusal to attend Democracy Summit in the United States in December 2021 and the then Prime Minister Imran Khan's subsequent visits to Beijing and Moscow do not imply that Islamabad has taken a shift from the liberal order to autocratic regimes nor does it mean that Pakistan is going to introduce anti-West and pro-Russia and China policies. However, Islamabad has a realization that after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it would now have focus on China in the region (Khokhar, 2022). Former Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Russia in February 2022 reflected the country's gradual drift away from the West towards the East (Siddiqua, 2022). In the emerging geopolitical scenario, Russia would try to expand ties with Asian countries, including Pakistan; and Islamabad would obviously want to build relationship with all major powers (Chaudhry, 2022).

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Kabul has been an important factor in Pakistan-Russia ties; and for most of the period, this factor has added to deteriorate the ties. The longstanding bitterness and distrust, though considerably reduced in the recent years, was also mainly caused by the Afghan issue. However, for the last couple of years, Afghanistan is proving to be a factor to bring the two countries closer. The centrality of Afghanistan in the Moscow-Islamabad cooperation in diverse sectors including security, economy, trade, investment and energy cannot be denied. Rather, regional connectivity hinges on Afghanistan. In order to have a stable Afghanistan for a peaceful neighborhood, Islamabad and Moscow have been engaged at bilateral level as well as on multilateral forums. With the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021 and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the role of the regional countries has gained even more importance to bring stability to the war-ravaged country. Any instability in Afghanistan will affect the neighboring countries; and among them, Pakistan will be hit in the severest manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explain how Afghanistan had been a factor in cold rather hostile Islamabad-Moscow relationship during the last two decades of the 20th century and how the Afghan issue has now created opportunities for the two countries to cooperate and collaborate for mutual benefits of peace, security, stability and prosperity. In order to understand the phenomenon in the study, soft data will be used with qualitative approach. Data was collected from secondary sources, including

journals, books, newspapers and official statements. Primary source data was also utilized by interviewing a couple of experts on the subject. The content retrieved from interaction with the relevant people is explained in the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since developments pertaining to the subject under study continue taking place every day, the latest literature, including research articles, news stories and official statements were reviewed. In his article titled "What is driving Pakistan's outreach to Russia," Riaz Khokhar has explained how interests of Pakistan and Russia converge in various areas. He articulated that Russia and China want to exclude the United States from their area of influence in Eurasia, while Pakistan seems to be interested in working with these two countries to ensure its security interests. An inclusive government in Afghanistan, Mr. Khokhar adds, is a shared objective of both Pakistan and Russia (Khokhar, 2022). In her article titled "Bilateral bond between Pakistan and Russia deepening," Niha Dagai has stated that the two countries have understood well the importance of each other for them. She says Russia realizes importance of Pakistan for resolution of the Afghan issue and Pakistan also knows that Russia is back in the game (Dagia, 2021).

Ayesha Siddiqi, in an article, stated that Pakistan's current relationship with Russia is mainly driven by their shared interests of elimination of terrorism and dealing with the Taliban. She quoted sources in Pakistan military as expressing desire that Pakistan wanted to form power grouping with China and Russia. Dr. Siddiqi noted that Pakistan is signaling to the United States and the West and it wanted greater independence in pursuing relations (Siddiqi, 2022).

Claudia Chia and Zhen Haiqi viewed that Pakistan and Russia are on the same side of geopolitical competition and the two countries' improving ties indicate harmony between them in response to the prevailing geopolitical realities (Chia & Haiqi, 2021). According to FM Shakil, the emergence of Islamic State Khorasan has paced up the improvement in the Moscow-Islamabad ties (Shakil, 2022). In his article, Fahd Humayun observed that Islamabad is interested to work with Russia to avert Humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and bring stability to South Asia (Humayun, 2022).

Najam Abbas argued that Russia, as a great power, has been striving to establish its influence in the region and beyond. While adopting a multi-pronged strategy, Russia intended to consolidate its military presence in Central Asia, build its perception as a key diplomatic partner in the region and act as the main player in connecting Afghan economy to the Central South and West Asia (Abbas, 2021). Russia also wanted to be part of Extended Troika that also includes Pakistan, China and the United States to be able to bring stability inside and around Afghanistan. While Pakistan, Russia ties were improving, Abbas stated, Afghanistan remained the main topic of discussion in meetings and telephonic discussion between the leadership of the two countries. According to Abbas, there was a perception in Moscow that its engagement with the Taliban would bring additional gains to its diplomatic interactions with the regional countries besides consolidating its presence and expanding its influence in Central Asia. On the other hand, the Moscow-format peace talks have provided opportunity to Pakistan to engage with the diplomats from Russia (Ramani, 2021).

The contemporary relevant literature, reflected in the above lines, suggests that Pakistan and Russia have a great many shared interests in Afghanistan for mutual benefits. Although Afghanistan

provides a bitter past in the course of bilateral relations, it is equally important today that Pakistan and Russia have found multiple courses of engagement through Afghanistan.

RUSSIA, AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Historically, Russia has had interest in the Afghan territory for multiple reasons such as geographical proximity, geopolitical confrontation, economy and trade routes from South to North. Russia's main objectives toward Afghanistan include stability and limiting the threats that might hit Russia. For the purpose, Russia had supported its former enemy Ahmed Shah Masood, the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami, in the Northern Alliance's fight against the Taliban before 2001. After the end of the Taliban regime, Russia tried to have good working relations with the Karzai administration. Later, Russia established better ties with the Taliban. Russia had also been facing various threats from Afghanistan, including drug trafficking and possible spillover of violence into Central Asian states. Access to warm waters had always been an important objective of Russia's keen interest in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The history of Pakistan-Russia relations is composed of varied elements, including cooperation, trade, distrust, hostility and rapprochement. However, the Soviet troops' entry into Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent war was the most important in the series of events that the two countries had experienced. In a bid to prevent Soviet advancement into its territory, Pakistan extended full support to the Afghan Mujahideen in their resistance against the Soviet troops. Pakistan also considered the Soviet invasion as a threat to its own security. The relationship between Pakistan and the Soviet Union had been highly antagonistic throughout the Soviet troops' presence in Afghanistan. The 1979-89 decade could be dubbed as the worst period of the Pakistan-Russia relationship. As Nomazoza puts:

The Soviet-Afghan war had a direct impact on the final period of the Soviet Union and the formation of a new government. Western Intelligence believed that the purpose of the Soviet invasion was either to obtain entrance to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf or start WWII in order to justify their own militarization and staying by military personnel of the USSR (2015).

Following the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Najibullah's pro-communist government in Afghanistan crumbled. He was not allowed to leave Afghanistan and he had to take refuge in the United Nations compound in Kabul, where he stayed for four years. While Mujahideen leaders entered Kabul and turned on each other, refugees continued to flee to Pakistan and Iran. In 1994, the Taliban emerged out of the Mujahideen and seminaries in Pakistan, and they started taking control of different parts of the country, beginning from Kandahar. In 1996, they took over Kabul, captured Najibullah and hanged him.

Russia had been concerned over the Taliban support to the Chechens and provision of sanctuary to the fighters fighting in Central Asian states. Moscow also had been backing the Northern Alliance group that fought against the Taliban. In view of terror spread and transportation of narcotics through Central Asian states, Russia supported the US-led global war on terror in Afghanistan. However, Moscow had been uncomfortable with the US prolonged presence in Afghanistan as it sees Afghanistan as a suitable place for military bases to have influenced over the region (Siddiqi, 2017).

Moscow had always seen Kabul through the lens of security. It faced various threats in the region; and the first one was the threat of transportation of drugs via Russia to Europe. Moscow, having concerns about militant activities in Afghanistan, did not want the Central Asian states to be affected by it. Russia also did not want that Afghanistan becomes a launching pad for other powers, particularly the United States. Rather, Russia desired to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. In order to counter the Western narrative in Afghanistan through soft power, Moscow intended to enhance its influence in the war-ravaged country (Dorre & Kraudzum, 2012). The CARs have abundance of natural resources, and the neighboring countries of Afghanistan wanted to have access to these resources through Kabul (Junaid & Mustafa, 2021).

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan would like to have engagement with the other powers that have influence in security and economy in South Asia and Central Asia. Under the architecture of Eurasia where Russia and China are cooperating to exclude the United States from their sphere of influence, Pakistan desired to work with China and Russia to ensure its security interests. Pakistan's geoeconomic vision and Central Asia vision largely depends on Russia's cooperation. Without Russia's nod, it would be difficult for Pakistan to work with Central Asian Republics for regional connectivity and trade (Khokhar, 2022). Pakistan and Russia also share interest in promoting inclusive government in Kabul. As the United States has exited Afghanistan, Russia would also try to keep close eye on the Taliban regime and also maintain close contact with Pakistan. Islamabad's relationship with the Taliban is complicated; however, Pakistan has been attempting to work in tandem with Russia, China, and the United States for stability in Afghanistan. It seems that Pakistan is willing to work with Russia to avert a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and promote regional integration (Humayun, 2022).

At present, Russia is interested in a stable, predictable and neutral Afghanistan. The US forces' complete pullout from Afghanistan in 2021 and the possible rise of violence and the Taliban insurgency are matters of serious concern for Moscow as this could also lead to permanent establishment of US military bases in Afghanistan. There is also a Russian apprehension that the instability in Afghanistan could have spillover effect in the Central Asian states.

Russia's traditional close ties with India had been an irritant in Pakistan-Russia relationship. However, since India diversified its options for import of defence equipment in 2010 and reduced arms imports from Russia, Moscow also tried reaching to other defence markets. Russia lifted its self-imposed arms export embargo on Pakistan in 2014 and also provided four advanced attack helicopters to Pakistan in 2017. Moscow's ambassador in Islamabad also endorsed Pakistan's case for criteria-based membership of Pakistan Suppliers Group in 2017. This clearly indicates that Pakistan is trying to strengthen strategic and economic ties with Russia. This can reinforce Pakistan's geoeconomic vision of South and Central Asia (Khokhar, 2022).

Afghan Peace Process

Efforts comprising engagements and negotiations with the aim to end war in Afghanistan began from the early days of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The 2001 Bonn Agreement was the first attempt towards the objective of peace after the US invasion of Afghanistan. During the Karzai administration (2004-14) and later in the period of President Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), several peace processes took place. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission published its

action plan for peace, reconciliation and justice, and the then Afghan government adopted the action plan in December 2005. On the recommendation of Afghan Peace Jirga in 2010, the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program was launched to strengthen administrative and security issues for peace. The program concluded in 2016. However, Afghan High Peace Council was established to oversee implementation of the program. The APRP ended in 2017 during the Ghani administration.

Later, the peace process intensified with the talks between the Taliban and the United States in 2018. As a result of an extensive dialogue process in Doha, the two sides reached a peace agreement on February 29, 2020. It was agreed upon that the United States would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan if the Taliban adhered to the terms. The Trump Administration committed to leave Afghanistan by May 1, 2021 if the Taliban reach a peace deal with the Afghan government and also do not let al-Qaeda and the Islamic State establish their footholds in Afghanistan. Later in September 2020, talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government began in Doha, Qatar. However, the incidents of violence increased, and the situation ended at the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021.

Pakistan's Role in Afghan Peace Process

While developments taking place in Afghanistan have a direct impact on Pakistan, Islamabad believes that peace in Afghanistan is imperative for peace and stability in Pakistan. There is a strong apprehension in Islamabad that violence in Afghanistan will have spillover effect in Pakistan. It would give space to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan to resurge and also invite more refugees, mounting the existing lot of about three million (Afzal, 2021). These possible effects in case of lawlessness in Afghanistan will affect the economic and social fabric of Pakistan. Peace in Afghanistan is also highly important for transit trade by Pakistan with CARs.

Since day one, Pakistan has been holding the stance that solution to the Afghan problem lies in dialogue with Afghan-led and Afghan-owned approach. The country's leadership has been insisting that the issue has no military solution. For the purpose, Pakistan has also played an effective facilitating role in the Afghan peace process. It convinced the Afghan Taliban for dialogue held earlier with the United States and later with the Afghan government in Qatar. In a statement, former Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi declared that Pakistan constructed a roadmap for peace. He claimed that the historic breakthrough between the United States and the Afghan Taliban could not have been achieved without Islamabad's efforts. The Minister said it was not easy to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table; that is why, the entire world, including the United States, is appreciating Pakistan (The Express Tribune, 2020).

Following the Taliban takeover, the people of Afghanistan have been facing an impending humanitarian crisis for shortage of food and medicine. Pakistan has been urging the world, particularly the United States and Europe, to engage with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, lift sanctions on them and resume financial assistance to avert a humanitarian crisis. Pakistan has rightly warned the world that continued sanctions and frozen funds of the Afghan government would lead to economic meltdown of the country, worsening the prevailing critical humanitarian situation. It has emphasized that incentives, instead of punitive measures, may help moderate the Taliban behavior. By engaging and offering incentives, the Taliban government, Islamabad believes,

might be better convinced to form an inclusive and representative government, honor commitments for ensuring basic rights, including rights of women and journalists and fulfill counter-terrorism obligations. On its part, Pakistan has been facilitating UN agencies' aid supply to the Afghan people by opening road and air humanitarian corridors. Despite facing extreme financial constraints, Islamabad also committed to provide food, medicines and other essential items worth \$30 million. Pakistan hosting millions of Afghan refugees for decades has expressed reluctance to host more refugees. In an interview to UK-based *The Independent* on September 15, 2021, the then Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, "we have our limitation. Pakistan has been hosting over three million, close to four million refugees for so many decades without any international help or assistance. We do not have the capacity to absorb more (Trew, 2021)"

Moscow considers Islamabad very important for stabilization in Afghanistan. It believes that after the US pullout, the Afghan issues could only be resolved through a constructive role of Pakistan and Iran. Russia and China are engaged with Pakistan in the efforts to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and Russia believed that political settlement in Afghanistan is inevitable for peace and security in the region. Instability in Afghanistan is a matter of concern for both Islamabad and Moscow. Deputy Speaker of the Russian Senate Konstantin Kosachev recently stated that Pakistan and its Pashtun population have an important role to play to deter spread of radicalism (Abbas, 2021)

Russia's Efforts for Peace in Afghanistan

After 1991, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan was clear that it would not take part in the internal politics of Afghanistan; however, the 9/11 incident changed the world dynamics. Russia welcomed the US move of toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as the United States had assured that it would eliminate the fighters belonging to Chechnya and other terrorists as well, who posed security threat to Russia. The situation was beneficial for both the countries (Rafiq, 2017).

For a long time, Russia's main interest vis a vis Afghanistan had been to stop potential threats of terrorism from the south. Over the time, Moscow started showing more activity from about 2014 to 2016 (Asatryan, 2021). In 2014, it started taking interest in internal politics of Afghanistan. Russia never denied its contacts with the Taliban, and it had been in contact with the Taliban when the United States was preparing to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan after 20 years and a peace process was being negotiated. In addition to having contacts with political identities of Afghanistan, Moscow had also established friendly relations with all the neighboring states of Afghanistan. In 2016, Moscow started an initiative to conduct talks among the neighboring countries of Kabul for Afghan peace (Ibrahimi, 2018). Talks were held in Moscow in 2019 in which many prominent Afghan leaders and the Taliban leadership participated. It was a serious effort by the regional powers showing their commitment for peace in Afghanistan (Roth, 2018). Russia provided a platform to all the stakeholders (Revell, 2019). Moscow has hosted several rounds of talks. When former US President Donald Trump suspended talks with the Taliban in September 2019, Russia offered to act as a guarantor between the Taliban and the United States. It showed Russia's commitment for peace in Afghanistan (Ramani, 2019).

While the Western countries and their representatives were shocked by the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021 and they were panicked to leave Afghanistan, Russia reacted normally

describing the Taliban as “normal guys” in the city. President Putin stated that the Taliban takeover is a reality that has to work with. Unlike most of the foreign embassies in Kabul, Russia’s diplomatic mission remained open. Russian Ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov met a Taliban representative soon after the takeover and stated that he had not witnessed any violence. Russia’s representative in the United Nations spoke of bright future of Afghanistan, expending return of law and order and end to bloodshed after many years (Kozlov & Rynda, 2021).

Like Pakistan, Turkey and Qatar; Russia supported negotiated mechanism to ensure representation of all ethnic and political groups in Afghan government. It believed that such a setup would better serve the Afghan people as well as the neighboring Central Asian states. Russians also viewed that working with the Taliban would help them safeguard their national interests. Russia has been eager to be part of the Troika Plus for joint efforts along with Pakistan, China and the United States to bring stability to Afghanistan. Being cognizant of the role of the neighboring countries for addressing the mutual concern of extremism, Moscow has also been engaged with Turkey, Iran and India. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that the Taliban have given assurances that they have no intention to destabilize the neighboring countries (Abbas, 2021).

As a part of its engagement with Afghanistan and the Central Asia states, Russia has been following a multi-track approach of using diplomatic clout and military muscle. Besides consolidating its military presence in Central Asia, Moscow is also trying to emerge as an important player to connect Afghan economy with the outlets in Central, South and West Asia.

Moscow Format

In 2017, Russia introduced a mechanism of coordination and consultation among the regional countries to discuss and find ways for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Initially, the six-party mechanism consisted of special representatives from Russia, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran and India was formed. Later, the members increased with the inclusion of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The neighboring countries of Afghanistan gathered at this forum to discuss their concerns and reached a consensus to find out a solution to the Afghan situation. The forum held various rounds of talks in 2017 and 2018.

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, the forum met in Moscow on October 20, 2021. On conclusion of the meeting, it adopted a joint statement, vowing to respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. The members urged the new Taliban government in Afghanistan to form “a truly inclusive government that adequately reflects interests of all major ethnopolitical forces in the country (Teslova, 2021).” The forum welcomed the Taliban commitment to ensure that the Afghan territory would not be used against other states. The forum also committed to provide assistance in fighting against terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The members proposed of convening a world donor conference under the United Nations to help the Afghan people. They emphasized the need for engaging with Afghanistan. The Taliban government also welcomed the Moscow Format meeting. Zakir Jalaly, a representative of the Foreign Ministry of the new Afghan government, stated, “it was a very good meeting in a very positive atmosphere (Teslova, 2021).” According to media reports, the United States was invited to the meeting, but it did not attend. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov regretted the US absence from the meeting.

Troika Plus

Moscow is a part of another important forum called Troika Plus or Extended Troika on Afghanistan. Besides Russia, Pakistan, China and the United States have held several meetings under this platform to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. After the Taliban takeover, the group met in Islamabad on November 11, 2021. On the sidelines of the meeting, the participants also met with senior representatives from the Taliban government, including Afghan Interim Foreign Minister Amir Muttaqi.

In a joint statement after the meeting, the representatives of the Extended Troika agreed to continue “practical engagement” with the Taliban government and provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people (Yousuf, 2022). They also made it clear to the Taliban regime that it would have to do more to get themselves recognized. The Troika Plus urged the Taliban government to take steps to establish an inclusive government, ensuring equal rights to women. The forum is trying to reach consensus on the Afghan issue. Of the four members, Pakistan, China and Russia are in favor of unfreezing the assets of the Afghan central bank worth \$9.5 billion. China and Russia are also of the view that the United States should take main responsibility for averting humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan because Washington is responsible for the prevailing critical situation in the war-ravaged country. However, all the four members have consensus that the Taliban should fulfill international expectations, including a representative government, women rights and no terrorist activities.

Pak-Russian Convergence of Interests in Afghanistan

The growing US-India strategic partnership, rising US-Russia confrontation and deteriorating Islamabad-Washington ties have created a favorable environment for Pakistan and Russia to come closer to each other. Besides, there are other factors as well that provide the two countries opportunities to engage mutually for benefit of the two as well as other countries of the region. While Afghanistan’s importance for peace and stability in the region and regional connectivity cannot be denied, the world has also recognized Pakistan’s pivotal role for peace in Afghanistan. Being a major world power and a key stakeholder of peace in Afghanistan, Russia also has been actively involved in the Afghan peace process. Pakistan and Russia have multiple common objectives on the platform of Afghanistan and also some irritants in enhancement of bilateral engagement and cooperation.

Having sensitivity of militancy threat and spillover effect of violence from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Russia have realized that peace in Afghanistan is imperative for regional peace and security. Given Pakistan’s key role on the Afghan issue, Russia has been actively engaged in peace efforts in Afghanistan and also maintaining coordination with Pakistan. Moscow has also hosted various rounds of dialogues on the Afghan issue. Russian President Vladimir Putin twice called former Prime Minister Imran Khan on August 25, 2021 and on September 14, 2021 to discuss the situation in Afghanistan in the wake of the new Taliban government in the country. The two leaders underscored the importance of peace and security in Afghanistan for regional peace and stability (The Express Tribune, 2021). Following the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Moscow did not abandon the new interim government in Kabul rather it had been trying to convince the Western world that the Taliban government must be engaged to avert a humanitarian crisis in the war-ravaged country. Pakistan and China too had the same opinion on the issue. Islamabad had been extending all

possible assistance to the new Afghan government and also calling upon the international community to play its due role to stave off a humanitarian crisis.

Pakistan and Russia had been on the path of building better ties for about two decades. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a two-day official visit to Russia on February 23, 2022, which was the first visit by a Pakistani prime minister to Moscow after 23 years. The timing of the visit was widely criticized because it coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the course of developments that have impacted on the Islamabad-Moscow bilateral relationship these days, the importance of Afghanistan cannot be denied. In order to find answer to the question; Whether interests of Pakistan and Russia converge in Afghanistan? The researcher talked to six experts on the subject. A brief description of the talk of these relevant persons is being reproduced in the following lines.

Former Defence Secretary Lt. General (retired) Naeem Khalid Lodhi viewed that Pakistan and Russia have convergence of interest particularly in political and economic spheres vis a vis Afghanistan. As for political reasons, he said, Russia wanted to undo all the bitter feelings of Afghans against it. And secondly, he added, if this North-South communication is established, Russia will be able to pass through Afghanistan and then Pakistan.

According to Asif Yasin Malik, former Defence Secretary, since peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in the interest of both Pakistan and Russia, their interests in Afghanistan converge. As for economy, Pakistan has tactical economic interest vis a vis Afghanistan as we do trade in mostly daily use items like rice and wheat; however, Russia and China have strategic economic interests with an intention to exploit mineral resources of Afghanistan. Asin Yasin Malik stated that although there is similarity of interest, the level of interest differs.

Former Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir believed that Pakistan and Russia have a shared goal of attaining durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. The two countries' interests largely converge.

Former Ambassador Asif Durrani told the researcher that Pakistan has been pursuing restoration of peace in Afghanistan. After the new government in Kabul, he said, peace has largely been restored in Afghanistan; however, the Taliban regime is under sanctions. Asif Durrani said a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan will force the locals to migrate to neighboring countries, especially Pakistan. Afghans have common ethnicity in Pakistan. As for Pakistan-Russia relations, he added, it is true that Afghanistan is factoring the two countries in coming closer to each other.

According to Syed Muhammad Ali, Director Nuclear and Strategic Affairs, Center for Aerospace and Security Studies, Pakistan and Russia have similarities of interest in various areas, though they are not identical. First, both the countries do not want an unstable Afghanistan; and therefore, have been making efforts for building a stable Afghanistan. Obviously, Islamabad and Moscow have common interests of elimination of terrorism, extremism and drug trade. However, despite having these key interests, Moscow has been skeptical about the new Taliban government because Moscow wants an inclusive government in Afghanistan. If the Taliban show more accommodation towards Tajik and Uzbek people, the relations between Moscow and the Taliban government will improve; and then, Russia will hopefully encourage the Central Asian states to proactively contribute to development in Afghanistan.

Andrew Korybko, a Moscow-based Political Analyst, said prevention of regional terrorist threat is the most important common interest for Pakistan and Russia vis a vis Afghanistan. This apprehension led Moscow to engage with the Taliban for advancing peace process. It is also a common desire that the war-ravaged country does not witness another civil war that would give birth to another refugee influx, which would directly affect Pakistan. Andrew Korybko said refugee influx into Central Asian states might affect Russia as well because terrorists will enter Russia exploiting visa free regime in Central Asia. The goal, thus, is to contain terrorist and refugee threat from Afghanistan. While Russia wants to have access to the south and Pakistan aids at north, Andrew Korybko said, regional connectivity is another important common objective to be achieved through a peaceful Afghanistan.

Courses of Engagement

Pakistan and Russia need to engage with each other on various issues in Afghanistan for security and stability inside the war-torn country and beyond.

Elimination of Terrorism, Extremism

Terrorism in Afghanistan has affected different neighboring countries, including Pakistan, the adjoining Central Asia Republics and Iran. Pakistan has suffered the most with a heavy loss both in terms of life and kind. Similarly, the neighboring Central Asian Republics have also suffered because of decades-long terrorism in Afghanistan. Pakistan has also hosted over three million Afghan refugees for decades. Both Pakistan and Russia have shared objective that terrorism in Afghanistan is eliminated for peace and stability in the region. They are also keen to ensure that extremism in Afghanistan does not affect any segment of the society in Pakistan. It was observed that Pakistan's decision to join the US-led global war on terror helped build trust between Islamabad and Moscow.

End to Violence

Clash among warlords has damaged to the deep the Afghan society. There had been violence and lawlessness in the country for decades. Pakistan and Russia have a history of backing different warring groups in Afghanistan. However currently, the two countries have actively been engaged in the Afghan peace efforts. Efforts have been underway to bring to an end the violence in Afghanistan for betterment of the entire region.

Narcotics Smuggling Control

Like terrorism and violence, narcotics is another very important aspect of the prevailing Afghan situation. The neighboring countries have grave concern over cultivation and supply of drugs to the world from Afghanistan. The people of Pakistan and Russia want that they are not affected by narcotics in Afghanistan.

Trade Routes

Regional connectivity and trade are key to progress and prosperity in today's world. China has focused this matter greatly. Russia too is interested to find new trade routes and enhance regional connectivity. Peace in Afghanistan is imperative for trade and regional connectivity. Islamabad and Moscow have common interest of peace in Afghanistan.

Limiting Threat against Russia

The US presence in Afghanistan is obviously a threat to Russia. Pakistan's sovereignty was compromised by the United States many a times in drone attacks during the war on terror. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has provided an opportunity to Islamabad and Russia to collaborate and find out ways to resolve the issues in Afghanistan.

Irritants in Pak-Russia Relations

There are various irritants in Pakistan-Russia collaboration on Afghanistan; and the foremost is the baggage of history. Although, the two countries have considerably overcome mutual trust deficit, they are still hesitating in getting into major deals. Russia's strong relations with India and Pakistan's traditional ties with the United States still have an impact. Sanctions against Russia is another matter that can hamper progress in bilateral ties.

CONCLUSION

The ground realities as well as views of the experts cited above indicate that Pakistan and Russia have various shared interests in Afghanistan. The two countries are concerned about any instability in Afghanistan that would have a direct spillover effect in Pakistan and would also indirectly affect Russia through Central Asian states. Pakistan's vision of geoeconomics and Russia's prospective economic gains through regional connectivity could not be materialized without peace and stability in Afghanistan. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, responsibilities of the regional countries have multiplied to contribute positively to peace and security in Afghanistan. Like other major states, both Islamabad and Moscow have emphasized the Taliban to take concrete steps toward establishing an inclusive government and ensuring rights to women. Afghanistan provides a great opportunity to Moscow and Islamabad to help build regional peace and stability as well as consolidate their bilateral relationship. Although the two countries have several bitter facts in their relationship like the U-2 incident, Russia's friendship treaty with India in 1971 and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there are some positive developments such as establishment of Pakistan Steel Mills by Russia, Al-Badar Satellite, Moscow's support for Pakistan's permanent membership of SCO, Russia's lifting of self-imposed arms embargo on Pakistan and signing of North-South Gas Pipeline project between the two countries. While former Prime Minister Imran Khan's February 2022 visit to Moscow has given a spur to the bilateral relationship, the West's sanctions against Russia and Russia's strong traditional ties with India would remain important factors in the Moscow-Islamabad ties.

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