

Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options

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Abstract

Pak-Russian relations have been marred by historical legacies, over-emphasized western dependence and Pakistan's Indo-centric approach. There have been many ups and downs in the history of their relations but most of the times they have perceived each other in negative mindset; Pakistan through the prism of western perception and the Soviets/Russia through the Indian eyes. Both countries have strong potential to improve their relations in the fast changing regional and global security environment but it depends how both countries utilize the new opportunities knocking their doors. Russian Federation is reasserting its role in its immediate sphere of influence and beyond, and Pakistan is looking for new avenues of opportunities in the face of US/western standoff. Therefore, both have geopolitical and strategic compulsions to improve their relations.

Key Words: Pakistan, Russia, United States, policy, power

Going back to the roots and analyzing theoretically, the history of Pak-Russia relations is a tale of misperceptions and lost opportunities. International political history is a western discourse; it is not intended here to go through the delicate discussion of post-modernism, especially of Michael Foucault, and demonstrate that knowledge is a function of the present power. In fact, here, it is just to highlight the obvious lack of rationality in the pursuit of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Russia. Rationality can simply be defined as a state understands its 'real' interests and a 'sincere' conduct of its foreign policy in realization of them.

Pak-Russian relations have often been under-rated, despite strong potentials, mainly due to misperceived notions and mindsets. There have been many opportunities to improve their relations but were lost due to different approaches to regional and global security perceptions. It is interesting to note that there is not a single bilateral issue between the two countries that divides them. Russian Federation is the inheritor of Soviet mantle; studded with strong nationalism, historical strength, geopolitical outreach and great power status. On the other hand, Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan and Central Asia, nuclear power status and growing anti-Americanism, have great potential for

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renewed Russian interest in Pakistan. However, both the policy practices and academic approaches in Pakistan were/are instrumental in neglecting this vital area of country's foreign policy. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to highlight the importance of Pak-Russia relations through historical analysis and lost opportunities. The study also emphasizes the future options for Pakistan in the light of 'revisiting' and 'revamping' of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Critical Assumptions

While analyzing the Pak-Russia relations, it is important to understand some underlying assumptions in Pakistan's strategic thinking shaping its foreign policy.

The Colonial Legacy: Pakistan's foreign policy is mainly shaped by its colonial legacy of being a part of the British Empire. The over-riding emphasis of Pakistani elite, feudality, bureaucracy and military, led to the pro-western approach in its foreign policy dealings. Therefore, Pakistan preferred a distant ally over an immediate neighbor; making a choice between the US and former USSR. Many observed that rationally speaking, it would have been more in the interest of Pakistan to rely on the tangible help of Russia that was just a border away than over the US that was continent apart. But, it is a history that Pakistan delayed the acceptance of the Soviet invitation and 'managed' to get a similar offer from the US and accepted it in no time (Sattar, 2007, April 12).

Cause for this choice is interestingly in the colonial past of this country. It is a matter of fact that Britain was once the greatest imperial power of the world. After the World War II, it lost its power and could not hold on to its possessions. Thenceforth, the US replaced Britain as the protector of the free liberal world, but in its own fashion. The British India was a case in point. Failing to woo independent India, it turned towards the other part of the British India, i.e., Pakistan, and happily gained it over.

On the other side of the equation, the Pakistani elite was pre-dominantly western in its out-look (Haq, 2007, June 30). If Ghandi and Nehru were to some extent anti-imperialists, there was no such voice in the Pakistani side. Leader of the All India Muslim League, years before the independence, had deemed Communism as a threat and outlined the foreign policy that would be aligned towards the west. So it was not uncanny that Pakistan rushed towards the western bandwagon before rationally considering available alternatives (Fatemi, 2007, April 21).

The US Prism and Rationality: An apparent tragedy in the Pak-Russia relations seems to be the lack of this rationality. Pakistan failed to make a realistic analysis of the worth of Russia. This failure can be mainly attributed to

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a distortion of perception, as the object was being watched through the prism of another state. For half a century of the US Cold-war, the subject of international relations subjectively popularized the perceptions, interests, and policies of the liberal superpower. The whole subject of international politics flourished in the backyard of America in particular, and in the western hemisphere in general. So, the history of international relations, as we know it today, is the history of the US perception of the world.

The world of the former Soviet Union was kept tightly behind the iron-curtain of academic oblivion. So, if we agree on the fact that academicians live in an environment of academic materials, the academicians of the world were denied the full range of facts on Russia, marring their ability to become objective. Obviously, if perception is not objective, decisions cannot be rational. This is where we come to know that the decision making elite of Pakistan was not being 'objective' in their views towards Russia. They were 'internalizing' the former USSR as portrayed by the western knowledge as an 'Evil Empire.' Therefore, Pakistan viewed the former Soviet Union, and even now the Russian Federation, through the prism of Western, especially American world-view.

India-centric Foreign Policy Perception: Pakistan's foreign policy revolved around the orbit of India for most of its life. Many factors contributed in this direction; initial rivalry with Indian National Congress, communal riots during partition, territorial issues including Kashmir, and the 1948 war. Whatever the reasons, Pakistan has an over-arching drive for maintain the balance of power with its superior rival neighbor, and that drive also effected its relations with Russia. As Pakistan moved closer in the western alliance system and as India forged good bilateral relations with the former Soviet Union; Pakistani decision-making elite more and more tended to see Russia as a friend of India, and the enemy of Pakistan (Haq, 2007, June 30).

This Indian-centricism has also a positive note. It can be argued that Pakistan had no bad intentions towards the former Soviet Union. Its decision to join western defense arrangements was aimed against its eastern neighbor only. Pakistan, itself, had no policy against the Soviet Union. But, it is also a fact that because of these alliances, Pakistan, its territory and institutions, were indirectly used against the Soviets. And, it also hampered Pakistan from taking a pragmatic view of the Soviet Union and forging any good relations. However, it was only after the end of the Cold-war that Pakistan was able to think of an independent policy towards Russia and even then, the past perceptions became the main obstacle in mending the ways.

Historical Recount

As it is said in the international relations that 'none is permanent friend or enemy' the same applies to Pak-Russian relations. Pakistan and Soviet Union established diplomatic relations in May 1948. A brief history of Pakistan's treatment of Russia, mostly the Soviet Union, suggests a meddling in the global power politics siding with the US (Sattar, 2007: 12). Even at the inception of Pakistan, it sent a series of delegations to the US and Britain for finances and weapons. These moves suggested things to come in the future. Pakistan showed its willingness to join the British inspired Middle East Defense Organization (MEDO), which was obviously a strategic ploy to contain the Soviet Union in that region. This plan did not materialize but it proved the western credentials of Pakistan. Things came to the surface when Pakistan officially joined the US defense pacts; the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Sattar, 2007: 46-50). In abstract, these arrangements were aimed at containing the communist ideology; on ground, they were operational against two great powers; the USSR and China (Burke, 1988: 98-99). Thus, Pakistan had become a part of the US strategic battles. Ironically, both the targets were its neighbors against a distant friend.

Gradually, Pakistan became the front-line state against war on communism. By the end of the Suez Crisis (1956), it had become one of the most trusted allies of the US. This event also strengthened the perception among the Muslim states that Pakistan was an extension of western arm into the Muslim world. Pakistan supported the Anglo-French forces against the nationalist forces of Gamal Abdul Nasir. Even, then, Pakistan had refrained from giving any outright commitments against the Soviet Russia. But, ultimately, in 1959, Pakistan signed an agreement with the US to counter the communist activities on its western borders. It was a security arrangement specifically against the Soviet Union. Things got worse, when in 1962 the Soviets captured the pilot of a US spy plane on its territory. The pilot revealed that the plane had taken off from the Badaber Airbase, Peshawar in Pakistan. It is related that the furious Soviet leader, Khrushchev, circled Peshawar red on map. The Pak-Soviet relations had deteriorated to its worst (Haq, 2007, June 30).

However, during President Ayub's period Pakistan sought to improve relations with the Soviet Union; trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries increased between 1966 and 1971. But the Soviet criticism of Pakistan's position in the 1971 war with India weakened bilateral relations, and many Pakistanis believed that the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation, encouraged Indian invasion of East Pakistan in December 1971. Subsequently, Soviet arms sales to India, amounting to billions of dollars on concessional terms, reinforced this argument. The USSR

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also kept vetoing every resolution regarding the East Pakistan situation that Pakistan brought to the UN.

In 1974, as Prime minister, Z.A. Bhutto paid a state visit to Moscow and deliberately attempted to warm the relations. For the first time in the history of Pakistan, Soviet Union's ties with Pakistan began to warm and relations were quickly improved. Bhutto negotiated for the integrated steel mills, which prompted the Soviet Union to establish the billion dollars worth Steel mill on its own expanse. Previously in 1960, Bhutto had Soviet Union to establish the Pakistan-Soviet Oilfield in Pakistan in search of oil assets in Pakistan. During the 1973 till 1979, Soviet Union and Pakistan had enjoyed a strong relation with each other, which also benefited the Soviet Union. Later, after the USSR's military invasion of Afghanistan, the relations between the two states saw the darkest time. During the 1980s, tensions increased between the Soviet Union and Pakistan because of the latter's key role in helping to organize political and material support for the Afghan Mujahidin and Taliban forces. With the Help and assistance of Pakistan and backed by American money and arms, Mujahidin forced the Soviet forces to withdraw from Afghanistan. Pakistan played the pivotal role in this big game; hence this caused a serious damage to the bilateral relations of Pakistan with Russia. The withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the collapse of the former Soviet Union resulted in significantly improved bilateral relations, but Pakistan's support for and recognition of the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan became another source of tension.

Therefore, things showed some signs of improvement during the reign of Z.A.Bhutto in 1970s. Using the concept of "Bilateralism" in its foreign policy, Pakistan improved its relations with communist states. But, by the end of that decade, the US again started a massive thrust towards its western borders. The Afghan War of 1980s was the culmination of US alliance with Pakistan against the USSR. Pakistan was now headlong into the strategic battle between the two global powers. In this war, Pakistan not only became the conduit of US war efforts but it also became the main source of manpower and ideology. Instead of a US war against the USSR, it was more and more being depicted as the Pakistan's war against the latter on the theory of "warm waters." The policy-makers of Pakistan had sold among its public a theory that the Soviets were in fact posing threat to the survival of the state, as it wanted to reach the Arabian Sea after running over Pakistan; segments of it survive even today. Pakistan, as the war progressed, also crossed the permanent Soviet red lines in Afghanistan, challenging its historical sphere of influence.¹

The post-Cold War era saw the rebirth of Pak-Russian relations. These relations strengthened during the rule of Nawaz Sharif. Pakistani Prime Minister made an epic visit of Russia and got into many trade and industrial

treaties. This visit of Pakistani Prime minister was incredible as it gave a new turn to Pakistan's relations with Russia. Later, exchange of visits after every year or two became the part of routine foreign tours by both Pakistani and Russian top leaderships.

Later on, in the war against terrorism, Pakistan changed its policy towards Taliban when it joined the US forces in helping to overthrow them following the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001. The decision of Pakistan to join the international struggle against terrorism has led to Russia-Pakistan relations being greatly improved. Russia vowed its support for Pakistan as it fights against the Taliban militants. In 2007, the relations between Pakistan and the Russian Federation were reactivated after the 3-day official visit of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. He was the first Russian prime minister to visit Pakistan in the post Soviet Union era in 38 years. He had "in-depth discussions" with Gen. Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz. The major focus of the visit was to improve bilateral relations with particular emphasis on ways and means to enhance economic cooperation between the two countries (Haq, 2007, June 30).

Since Fredkov's visit, relations have been steady but with below par progress. Prospects for joint collaboration in the oil sector were explored with the signing of a MoU on November 19, 2007 during Pakistan's petroleum minister's visit to Moscow. Economic interaction has till now lacked behind the strong political desire to forge close relations. The annual trade turnover is a pitiful \$700 million. Defense relations between Moscow and Islamabad have also been non-existent except one maverick helicopter deal in 1969 during then President Yahiya's visited to Moscow. Pakistan has now expressed interest in the purchase of a MI-35 attack helicopter to fight terrorism. A MoU is also under consideration on defense collaboration to intensify overall cooperation (Haq, 2007, June 30).

Under the present democratic government of Zardari-Gillani, relations between Pakistan and Russia have improved significantly. In 2010, Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin stated that Russia was against developing strategic and military ties with Pakistan because of Russia desire to place emphasis on strategic ties with India. In 2011 Russia changed its policy and Putin publicly endorsed Pakistan bid to join the SCO and said Pakistan was a very important partner in South Asia and the Muslim world for Russia. Putin offered Russia's assistance in expansion of Pakistan Steel Mills and provision of technical support for the Guddu and Muzaffargarh power plants and Russia was interested in developing the Thar Coal Project.

The early 1990s could have been a catalyst in the Pak-Russia relations. Two things had occurred; the Soviet Union had dissolved and Russia became a

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Federation; Pakistan had restored democratic government in the country. But, things turned out to be more negative. In 1996, Pakistan backed militants from the south, the Taliban, started an offensive against the government in Kabul, and soon captured it. Russia, in a bid to hang on to its piece of share, supported the Northern Alliance. Thus, again an indirect confrontation brought the two neighbors at logger heads with each other. The Taliban experiment, right after when Russia was a transformed state, jolted the hopes for improved relations between the two and their mutual relations remained strained as long as the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. These were the reasons that Russia did not think to support the US war against Taliban in 2001. And, in the post-US withdrawal scenario (2014), accepting the mutual spheres of influence in Afghanistan would be the test of the viability of relations between Pakistan and the Russian Federation.

Lost Opportunities

Even in such a bleak history, one can spot numerous moments which could have been seized upon and turned into opportunities for better relations. The first and foremost was the Soviet invitation that was unwittingly neglected to lure the US side. Perhaps, initially, the foundation of a balanced foreign policy could have been laid down with the normal acceptance of the invitation. Instead of shutting the door on USSR to get the US attention, it would have been more benefitting to keep both the options open. As Pakistan stroke a fine balance between USA and China, same could have been a viable option vis-à-vis the USSR.

It is also evident that the two communist states of USSR and China showed a great level of patience with regard to Pakistan's moves towards joining the western anti-communist alliances. Because of this patience, Pakistan was at last able to secure China on its side, same is yet to achieve on Russia. During the bilateral phase of Pakistan's foreign policy, Russia showed its interests in the security and economic development of the former. It justly arbitrated between Pakistan and India after the 1965 war. Instead of imposing the victor's peace, the Tashkent Agreement was not disrespecting for Pakistan that had lost the war (Rizvi, 2000: 141). It is also evident from the fact that the greatest critic of the Tashkent Agreement, i.e. Z.A.Bhutto, when came to power in 1970s, left no stone unturned to improve relations with the USSR. The Pakistan Steel Mill of Karachi is the reminder of that era when USSR responded positively to the friendly calls and extended its hand to the economic needs of Pakistan (Haq, 2007, June 30). The giant industrial venture by the Soviet Union depicted that it is serious in the economic and industrial development of Pakistan.

However, this improved relation could not last long as the Afghan War started in 1980s, which pitched Pakistani backed Afghan militia against the Soviet backed Afghan regimes. But, after the Geneva Accords of 1988 brokered by the United Nations, as the US withdrew hastily from Afghanistan, Pakistan got another opportunity to ameliorate its relations with the USSR. A negotiated and consensual agreement on the post-war Afghanistan between Pakistan and USSR could not only have improved their relations but it could also have made the entire region stable. But, unfortunately, Pakistan continued with the policy of moving behind Islamic militants, which culminated in the Taliban control of Afghanistan. This policy became further irritant as Russia suspected that these militants were also involved in the Chechnya conflict. So, a fresh start after the Geneva Accord became an option lost.

Now, after the 9/11 incident, both the states are parties to the same alliance with the US in their fight against terror. This is the opportunity that needs to be seized upon. Especially, when the war moves to an end, a consensus on post-war Afghanistan is very important (*The Express Tribune*, 2012, Feb. 9 & *Pakistan Today*, 2012, Feb. 9). Errors of the post-1980s should not be repeated here. Pakistan has now a wide field open to engage with neighboring states to resolve the regional issues.

Future Options

With the re-instatement of democratic dispensation in the country, Pakistan's foreign policy is being 're-visited' and 'revamped.' This time, there is a need to learn from the past mistakes and give importance to the immediate and neglected neighbors. Especially, when Russia seems all accommodating, Pakistan should make most of it. After the Salala Post incident, Russia condemned the attacks and issued a friendly public statement. Russia also supported the closure of NATO supplies to Afghanistan through Pakistan (*Dawn*, 2011, November 28).

It is unfortunate that during the last six decades, very few Pakistani leaders visited Russia. Interestingly, every visit has yielded very positive results; Tashkent in 1960s, the steel mill in 1970. Moreover, during the visit of Pakistani president to Russian Federation in June 2002, the Pak-Russia relations were institutionalized. The Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism, the Joint Working Group on Strategic Stability and Inter-governmental Joint Commission were established, these JWG's have held their regular meetings since then. Russia also supported Pakistan's entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to become part of Russian regional security mechanism (Haq, 2007, June 30). The SCO is an important anti-American regional initiative to bring peace and stability in the region. The SCO membership would not only enhance Pakistani status in the regional

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strategic environment but would also help in to remove Russian, Chinese and Iranian apprehensions about Pakistan being the part of Western/US regional security system.

Importantly, in the recent past there has been pro-activism between the two states at the higher levels. In September 2011, president of Pakistan paid an important visit to Moscow (*DAWN*, 2011, September 18). In March 2012, Pakistan's foreign minister also visited Russia and met her counterpart there. It is also expected that the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, would visit Pakistan by the end of this year (*The Express Tribune*, 2012, March 7). Importantly, there is not a single problem between the two countries that can divide them. There is strong potential of cooperation in energy sector, steel production, telecommunication, space technology, oil and gas (Demidov, 2012, April 23).

Pakistan should embrace these opportunities with open heart. It has enough to learn from the past mistakes and errors. It is now an accepted notion among the Pakistani intellectuals that its policy of completely aligning with a distant ally, and severing its relations with nearer states, cost it strategically, economically and socially. Not only that it could not find the US alliance up to the expectations but also left it bereft of alternative options. That alliance failed in realizing all its ideals. It could not resolve the Kashmir issue. It did not make Pakistan more secure against India; rather, India is now being projected as the regional power and the Indo-US nuclear deal has enhanced their mutual relations to the advanced strategic level. It did not make Pakistan a developed economy, which had been promised at the beginning of the relations; despite the fact that it always relied on liberal economy and the US advices. It also failed to make Pakistan a progressive and modern society, which was the corner stone of the liberal arguments in favor of the US alignment and rejection of the USSR; rather, the alliance turned up in radicalizing and fragmenting the entire state of Pakistan. Irony of the fact is that the ideal of choosing the democratic west against the authoritative east resulted in long and consistent spells of dictatorships in Pakistan. Comparatively, India that chose the other way round always had a stable and functional democracy in the country.

Conclusion

The history of Pak-Russia relations depict lost opportunities mostly by the Pakistani decision-making elite at the cost of rationality and national interests. The over-emphasized role of traditionalism and western bias, at the long term, could not brought the much cherished western political values, economic prosperity and social cohesion. In fact looking back to the last sixty years, more and more people are questioning the Western/US as core-value of

Pakistani foreign policy, which has made Pakistan more and more dependent. Interestingly, according to the Gallop Poll 2012, the US has replaced India as the no.1 enemy of Pakistan.

Based on these arguments and reading through the history of past errors, Pakistan should now 'redirect' its foreign policy. It should come out of its past (mis)perceptions and make a fresh start. The Salala incident, the Afghan imbroglio, Indo-US nuclear deal, and weakening economy, all suggest Pakistan should re-consider objectives and tools of its foreign policy. New geo-political and geo-strategic environment needs new readings and new approaches. An obvious error should not be extended and carried on into the future. Pak-Russia relation deserves rational understanding and a bold start.

However, in this globalized world, no state can live in diplomatic and economic isolation. Therefore, this new-found love for Russian should not again be compromised with rationality and national interests. Pakistan cannot ignore the Western states and the US, which are the largest trading partners, and contribute positively in the socio-economic development of the country. Pakistan in its 're-visit' and 're-formed' foreign policy should have an even-handed approach to all great powers, near and distant, to fulfill their national security objectives.

Note:

1. It is widely believed that the Soviet leadership conveyed to President Zia-ul-Haq during the Afghan war (1979-89) not cross the Soviet redlines, i.e. Oxus River.

End Notes

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