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It is a great privilege for me to be given the opportunity to speak at this esteemed forum to celebrate 75 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union, now the Russian Federation.

I wish to express my admiration for scholarship ranging over 200 years of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. The institution, which I represent, The Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, is the oldest think tank in Pakistan. It was established in 1947. When we reached out to the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, it was through that great scholar, Professor Yuri Gankovsky, author of *The Peoples of Pakistan: An Ethnic History* and the book he co-authored with Hafeez Malik, *The Encyclopedia of Pakistan*. And this tradition of research on Pakistan has been kept alive by Professor Vyacheslav Ya Belokrenitsky in his magnum opus — *A Political History of Pakistan: 1947–2007*.

I look at contemporary Pakistan — Russia relations through the lens of Russia's status as a great power — its incomparably large Eurasian landmass, its vast natural resources, its achievements in science and technology, its nuclear capability and its outer space programs. Above all, its resilience in standing tall and holding together after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1993.

The Soviet Union recognized Pakistan in August 1947 and diplomatic relations were established between the two countries 75 years ago. The relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation, have seen many vicissitudes. Today, however, there is a convergence of strategic interests as a multipolar world order is emerging which both countries support and for Pakistan there is also the importance of the growing proximity on global issues between Russia and China, its principal ally. I will deal with these relations both at the multilateral and bilateral levels, with some references to the history of important events.

At the multilateral level, foremost is the conflict in Ukraine, which the Western nations regard as an all out war and Russia views as a special military operation. In this conflict, Pakistan has remained neutral although it had defence ties with Ukraine. In the General Assembly resolution adopted on 2 March 2022, which criticized Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, Pakistan abstained from voting. There were 35 abstentions in all. Nor does Pakistan support the expansion of Nato to Russia's doorstep in Europe. Finland gained membership of Nato after the conflict in Ukraine started. Sweden is among those countries aspiring for membership, including Ukraine itself.

Pakistan and Russia also collaborate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In fact, apart from the original five founding members, Pakistan was the first country to apply for membership of SCO. It is one of nine SCO members. In SCO both countries focus on regional security, the fight against regional terrorism and religious extremism, with which Pakistan has been so affected. Pakistan's foreign minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari attended the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Goa, India, on 4–5 May 2023.

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The India factor has always been important in Pakistan — Russia relations. During the Cold War, India and Russia had a strong strategic relationship, which has continued after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both countries are members of BRICS, G20 and SCO. The Soviet Union, and now Russia, has been the largest supplier of arms and military hardware to India although India has now somewhat diversified its acquisition of arms and weapons. In 2014, for the first time, Russia lifted its embargo on arms sales to Pakistan, disregarding India's objections, and delivered Mi 35 gunship helicopters to Pakistan under the defence cooperation agreement of November 2014.

I speak of the Kashmir issue because it is as important for Pakistan today as it was 75 years ago. Russia does not support Pakistan's position on Kashmir, which is one of the core elements of Pakistan's foreign policy. The Soviet Union's stand on Kashmir was set during the Cold War in 1955 when Nikita Khrushchev visited India and endorsed India's claim. In the UN Security Council, the Soviet Union was the only country, which vetoed resolutions in 1957, 1962 and 1971 seeking UN intervention in Kashmir. It has never agreed to internationalize the Kashmir issue.

Russia has always maintained that the Kashmir issue should be resolved bilaterally between Pakistan and India according to the Shimla Agreement of 1972, and the Lahore Declaration which was a bilateral agreement between Pakistan and India signed on 21 February 1999 to ease tensions between the two countries, and was ratified by their respective parliaments. In fact, when India revoked Articles 370 and 35A of its constitution on 5 August 2019, stripping Kashmir of its autonomy and divided Kashmir into two union territories, Russia maintained that it was India's internal matter. Nor have we heard of concern about human rights violations in Kashmir which the world has condemned. Holding the meeting of the G20 Working Group on tourism in Srinagar on 22–24 May 2023 will be like putting salt on the wounds of the Kashmiris.

During the crisis in East Pakistan also, Russia vetoed resolutions moved in the Security Council calling for a ceasefire on 5 and 13 December 1971 to end the crisis. In the months building up to the civil war in East Pakistan, seeing the writing on the wall, India and Russia signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation which facilitated India's invasion of East Pakistan.

Analysts and historians in Pakistan sometimes claim that Pakistan broke up in 1971 only because of Indian military intervention. While it is true that India invaded East Pakistan with the moral support of the Soviet Union and it supported the *Mukti Bahini*, we should not forget our own follies. When Dacca fell, Indira Gandhi told her parliament that it was “a deed well done”.

Notwithstanding some ups and downs, however, much water has flowed under the bridges of the Amur River and the Indus River. In spite of political differences, the Soviet Union invested in Pakistan and it was with Soviet financial assistance and expertise that the giant project of Pakistan Steel was established in 1973. Major thermal power projects in Muzaffargarh, Multan and Guddu were also built by the Soviet Union.

As we live in the Asian century and are witnessing a dramatic change in the geopolitical world order, Pakistan seeks new avenues in its foreign policy. Since the 1990s, according to the Russian ambassador in Islamabad, trade with Russia has increased from \$100 million to \$500 million. Bilateral trade reached an all time high in 2020 at \$758 million. Numerous memoranda of agreement have been signed between the two countries — on trade, the economy, research technology and culture, military technical cooperation, cooperation on the development of the North-South gas pipeline project, on defence cooperation, between PTV and Russia Today TV, agreement on air services and on enhancing energy cooperation, energy trade and energy infrastructure investment. The latter agreements were reached at the 8th session of the Pakistan — Russia Intergovernmental Commission in January 2023.

They say that *Druzhiba* is the Russian word for friendship and many military drills under that name have been held between Pakistan and Russia in recent years. The first ever such military drills were held between Pakistan and Russia from 2016 to 2021. These training exercises were conducted at different locations in both countries. Also, Russia was among the 45 countries, including Nato countries, which took part in the multi — national AMAN exercises hosted by the Pakistan Navy in Karachi between 2017 and 2021.

It is in the energy sector that Russia's help can be most critical. Russia is the largest exporter of natural gas in the world and the second largest of oil. As Pakistan faces energy shortages, the roadmap for future cooperation includes the construction of a \$2.5 billion natural gas pipeline, which is part of a \$14 billion investment package promised in 2019. Most recently, Russia has also expressed interest in Pakistan's mega hydropower projects, Diamer Bhasha and Dasu and in providing electro-mechanical machinery for these projects — which offer was made during the intergovernmental meeting in January 2023. *Rostec*, a state controlled Russian company is now a stakeholder in the 1100 km Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline Project (PSGP) which will carry LNG from Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore. Pakistan's stake in this project is 74 per cent but because of Western sanctions on Russia, its future is currently uncertain. In spite of American sanctions, Pakistan has now placed its first order to buy discounted Russian oil, the first cargo to dock at Karachi Port in the current month, May 2023.

Turning now to Pakistan — Russia relations on Afghanistan, it is said that the security of Pakistan lies in stability in Afghanistan. During the long war in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Soviet Union were on opposite sides. However, the Soviet Union was a guarantor, along with the United States of the accords signed on 14 April 1988 in Geneva. This was a settlement reached between Pakistan and Afghanistan about non-interference and non-intervention, and the voluntary return of Afghan refugees. Also a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, which withdrew by 15 February 1989. The Mujahideen, who were not a party to the accords, refused to accept them and the civil war continued.

After the Taliban established their government in Kabul on 15 August 2021, thousands of people fled Afghanistan and sought shelter in Pakistan or used it as a transit to migrate to other countries. Also, Pakistan has become the victim of unrelenting violence from across the border. There has been no let up in the violence inflicted on Pakistan. The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has sanctuaries in Afghanistan from which it attacks security installations and other targets while the people of these regions clamour for peace, — as repeatedly reported from Swat. It is estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 lives have been lost in this violence.

Russia's policy on Afghanistan is reflected in the words of President Vladimir Putin at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi on October 2021: "Afghanistan is aspiring to be a modern state ... and Pakistan plays a no less important part in this than Russia and China. That is why we are interested in promoting cooperation — including with Pakistan — to achieve a common desirable result". Russia had hosted conferences on Afghanistan, which were attended by representatives of the then Afghan government, the US, Chinese and Pakistani diplomats and also by the Taliban to explore ways for achieving peace in Afghanistan. Last month, in April 2023, representatives of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan met in Samarkand to discuss the need to cooperate and engage with the Afghan authorities for the sake of political stability and to avoid a humanitarian crisis. Both Pakistan and Russia recognize the reality of the Taliban government but insist on the formation of an inclusive government and respect for human rights, especially the rights of women. As the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, has stated, respect for women's rights and an inclusive government are keys to Taliban recognition. Russia, however, has entered into a preliminary economic deal with the Taliban government.

Turning now to the issue of connectivity in the region and the dream of a trade and transport corridor from the border of Russia, through the Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan, to Pakistan's ports on the Arabian Sea. The challenges are formidable, especially financial, the terrain is difficult, and the uncertain security situation in Afghanistan. There are many projects in this repertoire. Take for instance, the Pakistan — Afghanistan — Uzbekistan (ПАКАFUZ) railway line, 573 km long, announced by Uzbekistan in 2018, which is critical for that landlocked state. Russian railways have agreed to help Uzbekistan to conduct a feasibility and provide technical assistance, and the Taliban authorities have offered security guarantees for the railway line. But the Islamic State Khorasan has vowed to kill anybody working on the project. The line, if built, would reach Peshawar through Torkham and goods would be transferred to Karachi, Gwadar and Bin Qasim ports. There is also the trans — Afghanistan railway project which is expected to connect Tashkent to likely export markets, including China.

Better known connectivity projects, CASA 1000 and TAPI, are still awaiting completion. TAPI, the Turkmenistan — Afghanistan — Pakistan — India natural gas pipeline will carry natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan into Pakistan. It will pass from Kandahar to Quetta and Multan in Pakistan and onwards to India. Some construction was begun, but has now been stalled.

CASA 1000, the Central Asia South Asia power project, is an electricity project linking Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, covering 1357 km. It will transport surplus energy from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is hoped that the project will be completed this year.

For all the connectivity energy projects, whether for gas or electricity, peace in Afghanistan is absolutely essential. It is in that country's own interest to benefit from these projects, as it will also gain financially through transit fees. But it is also true that for the success of these trade and interconnectivity projects, especially for the Central Asian Republics, the backing of Russia would be crucial.

Finally, in the fast changing geostrategic scenario, Russia itself can reach the warm waters of the Arabian Sea by having access to the use of Gwadar port. That will be a game changer in connectivity for the entire region, as much as CPEC is expected to be a game changer for Pakistan.

From my speech, the prospects for Pakistan — Russia relations would appear positive and encouraging. The problems will flow from the nature of the current transition taking place in the world order. Great statesmanship will be required in Pakistan to balance its relationship between the United States which continues as a major power in world affairs, and Russia and China. The enormous sanctions slapped on Russia, especially as a result of the Ukraine war, will also pose a challenge in meeting its commitments.