

STEERING PAKISTAN'S RELATIONS WITH THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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With a population of 241 million people, Pakistan is the fifth largest country in the world. In the 21st century, it has already held four parliamentary elections in 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018. The next election is scheduled to be held on 8 February 2024. Presidential elections will also be held in the Russian Federation in March 2024. Whichever party comes to power democratically in Pakistan will have to steer its foreign policy priorities in a fast changing global order. Although the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, released in early 2023, does not mention Pakistan by name, it refers to revolutionary changes in the global order. Russia's importance for Pakistan has increased because of its strategic convergence of interests with China, Pakistan's principal ally. There are many avenues of collaboration between the two countries. Both countries believe in building a multipolar international system. Especially after the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, Pakistan has tried to diversify its foreign relations. In spite of many vicissitudes in Pakistan's relations with Russia in the past, the changing world order has brought them closer. In the energy sector, Russian investments in Pakistan would be most critical. Russia is the world's largest exporter of natural gas and the second largest of oil. The new democratic government in Pakistan can seek Russian help in hydropower projects and try to revive the 1100 km Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) which will carry LNG from Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore, after the crisis in Ukraine has abated. Trade and military cooperation between the two countries have recently increased. Through membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) both countries cooperate in maintaining peace in the region and fighting extremism, as also through the recently enlarged BRICS, of which Pakistan has applied for membership. Pakistan is a victim of cross border terrorism from Afghanistan, which can be countered with Russian influence, and also the illicit flow of drugs. Most important is the facilitating role Russia can play in Pakistan's connectivity projects with the Central Asian States, many of which are stalled because of the turmoil in Afghanistan, such as the ambitious 573 km Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan (PAKAFUZ) railway line and the better known CASA 1000 and TAPI projects. Although Pakistan and Russia do not share a common border, Pakistan can support Russia's inspirational aim of establishing a Greater Eurasian Partnership by combining the potential of the states in the region and China's One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI) of which Pakistan is a committed member.

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