

VITALITY OF PAKISTAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS FOR REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Dear Chairman,
Honourable Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies,
Excellences,
Dear Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good Afternoon,
Assalam o Alaikum!

At the outset, allow me to thank the Chair for the invitation to participate in this important conference along with many distinguished speakers from Pakistan and Russia. I have very fond memories of my stay in Moscow as Ambassador of Pakistan to Russia from 2016 to 2019. Moscow is one of the most beautiful capitals of the world. People of Russia are friendly and hospitable.

During my stay in Moscow as Ambassador, I worked very closely with researchers of the Institute of Oriental Studies, in particular Prof. Dr Belokrenitsky and Dr Irina Serenko to exchange views on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest from time to time. Let me also mention that I had the fullest support of senior officials of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as other ministries and departments of Russia.

Let me now say a few words with regard to the title of the Conference. Pakistan is all set to hold Federal and Provincial elections on 8 February. However, I am confident that the outcome of the elections will have no impact on Pakistan-Russia relations as all political parties in Pakistan and State institutions share common desire to enhance relations with Russia.

Today's conference is the third Pakistan-Russia conference in nine months. The first conference was organized by the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow in May last year to celebrate 75 years of establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Moscow. The second was organized in Islamabad in November 2023 by the Strategic Vision Institute in collaboration with the Russian Center for Energy and Security Studies on "Pakistan-Russia Relations Amid Transforming Global Order". I participated in the previous two conferences and am delighted to participate in this one as well.

These conferences are in line with the upward trajectory of Pakistan-Russia relations and speak positively about the efforts of our think tanks to further enhance Pakistan-Russia cooperation with the support of our respective Embassies and Governments.

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Pakistan and Russia enjoy close and multifaceted relations based on mutual respect, goodwill and trust. Over the last two decades, both sides have worked closely and succeeded in enhancing relations in various areas including trade, energy, security and military-to-military engagement. Pakistan and Russia also enjoy close cooperation in multilateral fora. We come together as partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Let me now focus on my topic which is “Vitality of Pakistan-Russia Relations for Regional Connectivity and Development.”

At this point, let me recall a term that was coined by the then Defense Minister of Pakistan Mr Khurram Dastgir Khan during his visit to Moscow in 2018. The term was “RUPEC”, which stands for Russia-Pakistan Energy Corridor, similar to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is being built in Pakistan with Chinese investment of more than 60 billion dollars. But I will not restrict myself to RUPEC. I will also talk about Pakistan-Russia Maritime, Road and Rail corridors.

Pakistan-Soviet relations developed gradually after establishment of diplomatic relations on 1st May 1948. Although Pakistan was in the Western bloc during the Cold War, Pakistan and Soviet Union were able to cooperate on a number of important projects such as establishment of Pakistan Steel Mills, power projects at Guddu and Muzaffargarh and OGDCL. The desire to do more such mutually beneficial projects exists on both sides and will be the focus of my presentation.

In May last year, first ever direct shipping service between St. Petersburg and Karachi was launched. Arrival of NECO Line vessel “MV Crystal St. Petersburg” on 25 May 2023 at Karachi port marked the commencement of this service and establishment of a Maritime Corridor between the two countries. However, maritime trade routes have become vulnerable to geopolitical contestation and reaction to Israel’s genocide in Palestine. This highlights the significance of land corridors.

As during the Soviet period, focus of economic cooperation between Pakistan and Russia has remained on energy projects. These projects include:

1. In 2015, Islamabad and Moscow signed a USD2.5 billion contract to build the Pakistan Stream Pipeline, an 1,100 km north-south gas pipeline to supply gas from LNG terminals from Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore.
2. An Inter-Governmental Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) was signed between the two countries on 13 October 2017.
3. Pakistan and Russia also have interest in a regional undersea gas pipeline. In this connection, the two countries signed a MoU in February 2019 in Moscow on conducting feasibility study for a subsea pipeline from Middle East to South Asia.

Formation of Afghan Interim Government after the chaotic withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan in 2021 has enabled Pakistan, Russia and Central Asian Republics to enhance trade through Afghanistan. In recent months, trucks carrying goods from Russia and Kazakhstan have made first ever trips to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Also, Russian LPG has been transported by road from Russia to Pakistan through Afghanistan.

Interestingly, Afghanistan, which divided Islamabad and Moscow during the Soviet invasion was helpful in bringing the two countries closer due to shared concerns and approaches to the peace process, and orderly exit of foreign forces from Afghanistan. According to Pakistani traders, 90% of goods from Pakistan to Russia are being exported via Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Pakistan’s “Vision Central Asia” policy focuses on enhanced and result-oriented engagement with Central Asian countries under its five pillars:(i) Political; (ii) Trade and Investment; (iii) Energy and Connectivity; (iv) Security and Defence; and (v) People-to-People Contact.

According to the National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022–2026, Islamabad’s geo-economic pivot is focused on enhancing trade and economic ties through connectivity that links Central Asia to our warm waters. Pakistan is therefore working towards actualizing agreements on energy and transit with the Central Asian Republics. These include:

1. TAPI, conceived in 1992. It will be 1,800 km long pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India. Construction of the pipeline will transport 33 billion cubic meters of gas to the three countries.
2. CASA 1000 is one of Central Asia’s largest electricity transmission project from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is 1,250 km long. The project will provide 1500 MW of electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Russia has the opportunity to participate in these projects.

I recall that in 2017, during a session of Pakistan-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission, Russia expressed interest in upgrading Quetta-Taftan Railway line from Pakistan to Iran. According to media reports, Russia has expressed renewed interest in this project. This will be helpful in establishing a rail corridor between Pakistan and Russia via Iran.

Let me share with you that freight train service between Pakistan, Iran and Turkey resumed in December 2021. The train covers more than 1,990 km inside Pakistan, 2,600 km in Iran and 1,850 km in Turkey before reaching its final stop in Istanbul. It completes one side of the trip in 11 days. The journey takes 10 days less than the voyage of 21 days by sea. It is therefore possible to talk of a train corridor from Pakistan to Russia via Iran.

In February 2021, leaders of Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan agreed to a roadmap for a 573 km rail link from Mazar-i-Sharif to Peshawar, via Kabul. Rail and road routes already exist from Termez to Mazar-i-Sharif connecting Uzbekistan with Afghanistan.

Connectivity is also possible within the framework of SCO. Pakistan wishes to connect CPEC with other corridors in Central Asia. SCO holds a lot of potential for promoting connectivity in the region as in terms of geographic scope and population, it is the world’s largest regional organization, covering approx. 60% of the area of Eurasia, 40% of the world population, and more than 30% of global GDP.

Connectivity for development between Russia and Pakistan and realization of projects that I have spoken about will also be helpful in the realization of Russian President’s vision for integration of the Eurasian space.

Let me conclude by underscoring that the Moscow Format of Consultations was very effective in promoting peace in Afghanistan. We need a similar format to promote regional connectivity for development.

Thank you.