

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT BEYOND HISTORY: DEEPENING PAKISTAN-RUSSIA DEFENCE COOPERATION IN A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The paper has discussed the changing Pakistan-Russia defence relationship, which has evolved throughout the Cold War friendly animosity to a rational security relationship, taking place against a changing geopolitical backdrop. It evaluates factors behind this rapprochement, such as common security interests, the region stability requirements, and the desire to avoid overdependence on long-established partners. The operational pillars of cooperation discussed using realism and institutionalism perspectives are the arms transfer, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing.

The geopolitical enablers recognized in the analysis are the convergence of counterterrorism and the exponential associations of energy-security links, though the limitations through geopolitics are emphasized in terms of the defence relationships between Russia and India, and the responses towards China by Pakistan and the western sanctions on Russia owing to the conflict in Ukraine. The paper also evaluates the responses of the region, such as the re-balancing of India, the positioning of China in the emerging dynamic, as well as the prudent stance of the United States.

The study concludes that although the Pakistan-Russian defence cooperation is flexible and transactional and not of an alliance character, it demonstrates how middle powers can maneuver multipolarity to promote strategic autonomy. Through common ground and institutionalize means, the two states have a chance to create a more equal regional security order, in addition to coping with the external pressures, which can be used as a future model of those opposed to state relations desiring to have workable engagement within a shifting international community.

INTRODUCTION**The New Strategic Calculus**

The evolution of Pakistan-Russia relations encapsulates a remarkable paradox in contemporary international politics (Mahmood, 2024). Former fierce enemies locked in the spiral of a Cold War race, the two states are cautiously moving towards each other, where defence cooperation is concerned. From 1979 to 1991, Pakistan's staunch alignment with the United States and its facilitation of anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan positioned it as a frontline opponent of Soviet ambitions in South Asia (Iqbal, 2021). On the other hand, the long-term strategic orientation of Moscow towards India intensified misgivings between the two and limited any significant bilateral interaction with Islamabad. Yet, the post-Cold War period, and especially the developments following 2014, have upended this entrenched antagonism, laying the groundwork for a pragmatic, interest-driven partnership (Chaliha, 2022).

Several factors have catalyzed this rapprochement. The geopolitical vacuum created by the U.S. military drawdown from Afghanistan (Tariq et al., 2021), coupled with Russia's "Pivot to Asia" under President Vladimir Putin (Rachman, 2014), has opened diplomatic avenues that were previously inconceivable. Meanwhile, Pakistan's strategic imperative to diversify its security and economic dependencies—particularly in light of fluctuating U.S. support and its complex relationship with China, has prompted Islamabad to court new partners capable of bolstering its defence modernization and regional standing (Schneider, 2025). In this context, Moscow has emerged as a willing albeit cautious actor, seeking to expand its footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean while hedging against excessive reliance on its traditional partners (Cooley, 2025).

In this paper, the current relationship between Russia and Pakistan on a multidimensional spectrum is evaluated. First, it examines the major forces behind the emerging defence partnership. These reasons are geopolitical, responding to changes in regional centers of power, economic reasons that reflect arms-sale revenues, the desire to secure sources of energy, technological factors reflecting the needs of modernization, and cybersecurity requirements. Second, it identifies the consequences of this

convergence on the regional competitors, including India, China, and the United States, who will all have to rebalance their strategic assumptions against these newly forged synergies.

The central argument of this paper will be that both Pakistan and Russia are establishing a realistic defence relationship between them, which is covering the historical differences between the two, especially due to the core priority of security concerns of each nation and the dynamic nature of the Great Power realignment across Eurasia and South Asia. Yet, the nature of this relationship is also constrained by the historical contradictions, like Pakistan and Russia's relations, mainly because Russia is largely dependent upon India in its defence relationships. The geopolitical coyness of Pakistan with China and the larger dangers of the Western sanctions complex against the Russian military and financial institutions following the fallout of the Ukraine war.

To pursue this argument further, this paper is developed with a systematic attempt at unfolding the history of the Pakistan-Russia defence collaboration, its dynamics, and its future. Following this introduction, the theoretical framework outlines key International Relations theories, specifically Realism and Institutionalism, that illuminate the rationales for such realignments among states with historically adversarial ties (Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). The subsequent historical overview traces the trajectory from Cold War hostility to post-2014 engagement, identifying critical turning points that enabled the current convergence (Khan, 2019).

The core of the analysis delves into the principal pillars of contemporary cooperation: arms transfers and military modernization (Wezeman et al., 2024), joint exercises and naval collaborations (Qazi, 2022), and intelligence-sharing arrangements, particularly in counterterrorism (Zehra, 2024). This practical premise preconditions the discussion of the geopolitical facilitators that maintain such a fit, and those limitations that constrain it in its scope and intensity. By situating Pakistan-Russia defence ties within broader regional power dynamics, the paper highlights how India, China, and the United States perceive and react to this evolving partnership (Mankoff, 2022).

Lastly, the possible futures as described in the paper involve positive (deeper institutionalization and collaboration in technology) and negative (increasing sanctions and strategic frictions) trajectories. The report ends with practical solutions that the Islamabad and Moscow policymakers can implement to achieve consolidation of benefits, reduction of liability, and establishment of this partnership as a viable tool of strategic autonomy, not a transactional insurance policy.

Altogether, examining the motives, mechanisms, and challenges of Pakistan-Russia defence cooperation, the study fits into the general debate about the role of middle powers in the process of finding their way in the new reality of a multipolar world order. It is important to note in the analysis that the long shadow of history does not predetermine that contemporary security is necessary to redefine old fault lines in unexpected and significant ways.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Defence Realignments

The evolving Pakistan-Russia defence partnership can be meaningfully examined through selected lenses of International Relations (IR) theory, which help explain how historical antagonists find common ground amid changing geopolitical contexts. The following section reveals two fundamental theoretical directions, Realism and Institutionalism, and presents some practical models of defence cooperation to outline the existing character and depth of new relationships.

The closest explanation of such strategic realignment is due to realism. At its core, Realism posits that states act primarily in pursuit of security and survival in an anarchic international system where power balances dictate behaviour (Waltz, 1979). Pakistan's outreach to Russia aligns with the realist logic of balancing: faced with the unpredictability of its historically close alliance with the United States and the growing weight of India's strategic embrace of both Washington and Moscow, Pakistan seeks to hedge its bets by cultivating additional security partnerships (Paul, 2009). This balancing act has become even more pronounced following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which revived security threats along Pakistan's western frontier, including the resurgence

of the Taliban's offshoots and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) (Riedel, 2021).

In the case of Russia, the Realist rationale also makes it turn to Islamabad. By diversifying its South Asian engagements beyond India, Russia reduces the risk of strategic overdependence on New Delhi, which itself is strengthening ties with the U.S. and other Quad members (Sheikh, 2023). Moreover, by engaging Pakistan, Russia extends its influence into the Indian Ocean region, a long-standing strategic aspiration hindered during the Cold War (Shakil, 2025). Analytically speaking, the interests of the two states overlap in their desire to resist apparent U.S. hegemony in Central Asia and to pursue their shared themselves in the state of instability in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In complement to Realism, Institutionalism brings insight to how trust and collaboration begin to be institutionalized slowly over time in view of a historical background of distrust. Institutionalism emphasizes the role of international organizations, bilateral agreements, and structured dialogues in reducing uncertainty and facilitating sustained collaboration (Keohane, 1984). In the Pakistan-Russia context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is particularly significant. Both states are active members and increasingly utilize the SCO's security framework to conduct counterterrorism drills, intelligence-sharing, and policy coordination (Shaimergenova, 2024). SCO is therefore a confidence-building platform, whereby both parties normalize defence relations using a sunshine scenario and convert it into a strong bilateral balance.

The cooperation between countries is beyond multilateral institutions; there are bilateral agreements in the form of memoranda of understanding along the lines of arms sales, security arrangements. Russia's provision of Mi-35M helicopters and its openness to future deals involving tanks and air defence systems exemplify the gradual institutionalization of defence ties (Monitoring Report, 2015). Additionally, recurring military exercises, notably the Druzhba (Friendship) series, help operationalize commitments and foster interoperability between their armed forces (Embassy of the Russian Federation, 2021).

In order to operationalize these theories, it is useful to place the Pakistan-Russia defence relations in the

context of the current models of defence cooperation. Broadly, three models frame their interactions:

- **Arms Transfers:** This is the most visible form that deals with the sale and supply of military equipment like helicopters, tanks, and predictably sophisticated air defence systems. This model illustrates an asymmetric but mutually beneficial exchange. Pakistan enhances its military capabilities while Russia diversifies its export markets amidst Western sanctions (Wezeman et al., 2024).

- **Joint Exercises:** The recurrent drills like Druzhba and naval patrols in the Arabian Sea can be seen as an example of joint training, which creates tactical familiarity and trust. These exercises are particularly focused on counterterrorism and mountain warfare, reflecting shared security concerns in Afghanistan and border regions (Khan, 2022).

- **Technology Sharing and Intelligence Cooperation:** Although less publicized, this dimension involves cyberdefence collaboration and information exchange on transnational threats like ISIS-K and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Cengiz, 2024). Such cooperation indicates an evolution towards deeper, more sensitive interdependence, albeit with clear limits imposed by both states' other strategic relationships (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Combined, these theoretical frameworks and practice-based frameworks shed light on how Pakistan and Russia have shifted from transactional relationships towards a more organized and albeit tentative partnership. Realism can tell us the immediate security needs that motivate alignment, but Institutionalism can show us how organizations and arrangements facilitate the everyday operation of the alignment.

This theoretical background is critical in the context of the following historical overview as well as in making a critical appraisal as to whether this collaboration will further intensify into a historic strategic partnership or that it will be a practical marriage limited by larger geopolitical intercourse.

3. Historical Context: From Enmity to Engagement

Modern defence relations between Pakistan and Russia are based on a history of geopolitical alienation that has been informed by Cold War hostilities and realignments of strategies. Bilateral relations developed through ideological adversaries to coping with caution; there are multifaceted strands of bilateral relations which have evolved due to global order changes, crisis in the region, and national interests.

3.1 Cold War Fault Lines

Pakistan and the Soviet Union were on either side of the geopolitical divide in the course of the Cold War. Pakistan aligned itself with the United States through military pacts such as SEATO (1954) and CENTO (1955), seeking protection against India and economic aid to bolster its nascent infrastructure (Kapur, 2018).

Nevertheless, in the times of the Cold War, both countries tried to preserve good relations and develop cooperation in the spheres of energy and metallurgy, binding the countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Pakistan received assistance from the USSR to establish the Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDCL) and Pakistan Steel Mills. Nevertheless, they could not combine their efforts in the sphere of defence due to the discrepancy of their regional interests. During the Cold War, they only got two agreements (in 1969) for maverick helicopters. (Ali & Javed, 2024).

Moreover, the Western alignment made Pakistan a frontline state in America's global containment strategy, antagonizing the USSR, which in turn forged strong ties with India (Kidwai, 2025). The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, signed in 1971, symbolized this alignment and provided the Soviet Union with a key South Asian partner (Embassy of India, 2021).

A definitive break was handed over in 1979 when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Pakistan became an important pillar of the U.S.-led assistance to the Afghan mujahideen, who received access to weapons resources, training centers, and refugee shelters. This not only intensified Pakistan's security dilemma but also placed it in confrontation with Moscow's regional ambitions (Tariq, 2023). The USSR finally fell apart as a result of Pakistan's pivotal role in encouraging

jihad in Afghanistan, which subsequently worsened relations between the two countries (Ali & Javed, 2024). However, the covert war transformed Pakistan into a theater of Cold War proxy conflict, while further entrenching mistrust between Islamabad and Moscow (History of Pakistan, n.d.).

3.2 Post-Cold War Thaw

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the wave of the Cold War in the year 1991 provided the opportunity to rebalance diplomacy. However, early interaction was not as fast as it was overwhelmed by old baggage and unequal interests. Russia remained preoccupied with its domestic transformations and prioritized relations with India and China (Mirani, 2025). Only in the early 2000s did thawing start to appear. A series of diplomatic visits and defence discussions between 2003 and 2014 marked a cautious revival of bilateral dialogue (Shah, 2001).

Since 2011, Russia has been supporting a few major projects in Pakistan, such as the Heavy Mechanical Complex Taxila, Guddu and Muzaffargarh Electric Power projects, and the Thar Coal Project (Salman & Choudhary, 2024). One of the most significant confidence-building measures in the evolving Pakistan-Russia relationship was the negotiation of the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (formerly known as the North-South Gas Pipeline, NSGPP).

Though officially signed in 2015, the project could be traced back to the previous episodes of bilateral energy diplomacy. The agreement aimed to construct a 1,122-kilometer natural gas pipeline connecting Karachi to Kasur in Punjab, thereby enhancing Pakistan's capacity to transport imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) from its southern port to major consumption centers in the north, with Russian technical assistance (The News International, 2021). Nevertheless, although credited with frequent delays, the project represented a meeting of shared economic interests and an increasing degree of partners in infrastructure cooperation. In a significant development in July 2021, both sides restructured the ownership framework, with Pakistan's state-owned gas companies agreeing to hold a 74% stake and Russian firms retaining the remaining 26% (Bhutta, 2023).

Even Russia started to change its stand regarding strategic balance in South Asia. Although still closely aligned with India, Moscow's increasing unease with

New Delhi's growing defensiveness with the United States prompted a reassessment of the exclusivity of its regional partnerships (Pant & Raghavan, 2019). Pakistan, too, sought to diversify its external relationships amid strained ties with Washington, especially following the 2011 Abbottabad raid and subsequent cuts in U.S. military assistance (The Moscow Times, 2025).

3.3 Pivot Point: 2014-Present

With the year 2014, the relationship between the two nations (Pakistan and Russia) reached a turning point. Several external and internal factors accelerated cooperation. First, Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent Western sanctions pushed Moscow to deepen its outreach to non-Western partners, launching what became known as its "Pivot to Asia" (Moskalenko, Yu, & Rahaman, 2024). This tilt was of economic and security importance to work with China, Central Asia, and South Asia, including Pakistan. Second, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015 under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), transformed Pakistan's geostrategic relevance (Raza, 2024). As China's flagship project, CPEC introduced new imperatives for regional stability and infrastructure security, concerns that aligned with Russia's interest in Eurasian connectivity through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the SCO (Fazle-Haider, 2022). The further involvement of Pakistan in the Chinese-led projects left room where it could engage in a trilateral partnership with Russia, specifically in counterterrorism and energy. Third, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, completed in 2021, created a power vacuum that drew in regional actors (Kennedy, 2024). Both Russia and Pakistan are found to be concerned about terrorism, cross-border drug trafficking, as well as the spillover of refugees due to instability in Afghanistan. These overlapping interests have prompted sustained diplomatic and security engagement, including trilateral talks and intelligence coordination (Khurram, 2025). All these variables have shifted the position of Pakistan and Russia, who were formerly foes, to pragmatic collaborators. Although at the strategic level, they still differ more notably in their asymmetrical global positions and relationship inheritance, the after-2014 period introduces a turning point of functional collaboration

based on mutual interest in regional matters and hedging relations with West-centered blocs.

4. Pillars of Contemporary Cooperation

The current collaboration between Pakistan and Russia in the defence sector, though still young in comparison to their past association with other powers, has developed within a short period into a multidimensional activity. The relationship is no longer confined to diplomatic impulses or energy transactions and includes direct military interaction, sharing of intelligence, and strategic technology transfers. They are not decorative and point to Pakistan expressing a wish to diversify its defence relationships with Russia, keenly interested in rebalancing its South Asia policy. This part examines three key points of this partnership: arms supply and modernization, joint military training, and intelligence/counterterrorist activities.

4.1 Case Study 1: Arms Transfers and Modernization

The most palpable evidence of the strengthening of Pakistan-Russia defence cooperation is in the sphere of the transfer of weapons. In the past, Russia had not provided any high-fledged weaponry to Pakistan, which was largely caused by its age-old defence connection with India. But the recent geopolitical readjustment after 2014, particularly, the increasing closeness of India to the United States and Israel, made Moscow reassess its policy of selling weapons in the South Asia region.

The collaboration between the two nations has been on the rise regarding security. It all began with the visit of President Musharraf to Moscow in 2003, when both Pakistan and Russia decided to join hands in the areas of cooperation in many areas. Since this meeting, there have been a relatively large number of mutual visits of the officials of the two countries that have further assisted the cooperation. The most important thing to enhance security cooperation was that the Russian government voted to withdraw the self-arms embargo it imposed on Pakistan in the year 2014. After that, in 2015, Pakistan and Russia signed a landmark defence cooperation agreement, laying the groundwork for arms sales such as Pakistan signed a deal with Russia to import Klimov RD-93 engines for

the JF-17 Thunder aircraft (the engines previously came through China) (Hayat, 2020).

A breakthrough occurred when four Russian Helicopters Mi-35M assault helicopters for \$153 million US, which were handed over to the Pakistan Army in 2017 (Khan, 2018). The Mi-35M, a modern variant of the Mi-24 Hind gunship, is designed for both close air support and troop transport roles, making it especially effective for counterinsurgency operations in Pakistan's rugged northwestern borderlands (The Express Tribune, 2018). These helicopters were promptly integrated into the Pakistan Army Aviation and deployed in anti-terrorism operations against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants (Gady, 2017).

Pakistan has also expressed interest in acquiring T-90 tanks, Sukhoi Su-35 Flanker-E and Buk-M2 medium-range air defence systems, although these negotiations remain exploratory (Khan, 2018). The potential procurement of such platforms would significantly enhance Pakistan's conventional deterrence capability, especially in armored warfare and air defence domains where India has traditionally maintained qualitative superiority due to its long-term access to Russian technology (Malyasov, 2018).

In the case of Russia, these kinds of deals are just a larger feeble attempt to diversify its list of worldwide buyers of arms as Western sanctions are increasingly tightened. The availability of platforms of Russian origin can assist Pakistan in cutting its overreliance on the suppliers of the U.S., China, and the European countries' advent as well. But Moscow has played down its transfers to a careful degree so that it is not overtly offensive to India, and it underscores its newer position as a multipolar defence dealer in Asia.

4.2 Case Study 2: Joint Military Exercises

Besides a transfer of arms, the new common aspect of Pakistan and Russia's defences has been the institution and regular occurrence of joint military exercises. The most visible of these is the annual Druzhba (Friendship) series, which began in 2016 and has continued uninterrupted through 2024 (Rahmati, 2024). Initially modest in scale, the drills have expanded both in scope and complexity over time, focusing primarily on counterterrorism operations in mountainous and urban environments (The Express Tribune, 2021).

These exercises have been conducted in varying terrains—Pakistan's Cherat hills, Russia's North Caucasus republic of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and even near Pakistan's border with Afghanistan (RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal, 2017). Every iteration has simulated hostage rescues, anti-insurgency operations, and helicopter-based rapid insertions. Druzhba has not only been used to enhance tactical interoperability between Russian and Pakistani special forces but also to foster a relationship between two military organizations that are not historically familiar.

In addition to the land operations, the naval cooperation has also become one of the new areas in the burgeoning Pakistan-Russia defence relationship. The Pakistan Navy (PN) and the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) conducted the bilateral naval exercise Arabian Monsoon-VI in the North Arabian Sea, reflecting a shift from symbolic visits to practical operational cooperation. Various PN assets, including a destroyer, an offshore patrol vessel, a fast attack craft (missile), a maritime patrol aircraft, and a UAV, participated alongside RFN ships, while Pakistan Air Force (PAF) fighter aircraft notably joined multiple serials to enhance inter-service synergy. The exercise featured multi-faceted maritime warfare drills and a coordinated patrol, aiming to enhance interoperability while demonstrating a joint commitment to countering common maritime security threats (Haider, 2025).

Additionally, in 2021 and 2023, the Russian and Pakistani navies conducted joint patrols and anti-piracy exercises in the Arabian Sea, reflecting shared interests in ensuring maritime security and the safe passage of commercial shipping (Khalid, 2021). Such exercises represent a step-by-step increase in naval operations cooperation, moving beyond port visits and transit drills, towards organized tri-lateral joint maritime security operations.

It would be strategic to say that these developments are unrelated to the continuous blue-water capabilities of the Pakistan Navy, combined with the increasing presence of Russia in the Indian Ocean, whose presence is facilitated by a naval base located in Tartu. These drills serve both symbolic and operational purposes. These symbolically mark the change of geopolitical equations as Russia is inclined to cooperate with Pakistan despite Indian objections. Operationally, they make both militaries ready to deal

with real-time contingencies, such as combined action against terrorist threats or incidents at sea in the Arabian Sea or the Gulf of Aden to the wider Indian Ocean area.

4.3 Case Study 3: Intelligence and Counterterrorism Collaboration

It is also possible that the intelligence and effectiveness of counterterrorism cooperation is quite possibly the most delicate and tactical aspect of Pakistan and Russia's military relations. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, regional intelligence dynamics have undergone significant restructuring. Russia and Pakistan consider the rise of ISIS-K and the revival of TTP as a destabilizing transnationally oriented threat. In 2016, Russia initiated trilateral intelligence-sharing dialogues with Pakistan and China to coordinate responses to terrorism emanating from Afghanistan (Saeed, 2016). These dialogues later evolved into working groups and regular consultations (Geo TV, 2024). Russia has expressed strong concerns over the possible spillover of Afghan-based extremism into its Central Asian periphery and sees Pakistan as a key stakeholder in managing this threat due to its geographic proximity and longstanding influence in Kabul (Hill, 2021).

Cybersecurity cooperation has also experienced a boost, especially following the Pak-Russia Cybersecurity Cooperation Agreement of 2019. Through this framework, the two countries can exchange threat assessments, malware signatures, and vulnerabilities exposed on the critical infrastructure. Pakistan, which has faced several cyber intrusions targeting its nuclear, military, and financial systems, views this partnership as an opportunity to build its indigenous cyber defence capabilities with Russian technical support (Syed, 2021).

Besides, the cooperation in intelligence matters has been spread to the setting of transnational drug trafficking networks, channels of smuggling arms, and financing terrorism, which are direct SCO tableaux issues. Russian intelligence agencies have also participated in capacity-building programs for Pakistani officers, including joint training on counter-radicalization and de-radicalization strategies (Web Desk, 2024).

Though the cooperation of intelligence has increased in scope, there is a lack of strategic cooperation, but rather an act of practical application. It is highly problem-oriented and threat-centered, and there is obvious sensitivity to information and a shallow level of operation. Nevertheless, such a degree of coordination could not even be thought possible 10 years ago, which indicates a fairly fast shift in bilateral trust-establishing processes.

5. Geopolitical Enablers and Constraints

Pakistan-Russia defence relationship has matured under a multifaceted geo-political environment, which is a combination of converging interests and structural limitations. This part examines the importance of shared imperatives as a means of collaboration, coupled with the constraints of entrenched alignments and external pressures in terms of reducing the prospective course of action.

5.1 Converging Interests

In the case of Pakistan, diversification on the axis of the old U.S.-centric dependence of security is a force of strategy. The volatility of Pakistan-U.S. relations, exemplified by fluctuating aid, sanctions episodes, and Washington's shifting priorities post-Afghanistan withdrawal, has pushed Islamabad to seek alternative security partnerships (Akins, 2018). Russia, with its proven defence capabilities and relative willingness to overlook Pakistan's contested status within the global counterterrorism discourse, offers Islamabad an opportunity to hedge against geopolitical uncertainties while addressing its modernization needs (The Islamabad Telegraph, 2024).

Securing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further driven Pakistan's strategic realignments. CPEC, critical for Pakistan's economic future, faces persistent security threats from insurgent groups in Baluchistan and the evolving situation in Afghanistan (Sikandar, 2024). Russia's military support, intelligence-sharing capabilities, and potential naval cooperation in the Arabian Sea align with Islamabad's priority of protecting CPEC routes and infrastructure from both internal and cross-border threats (Salman & Choudhary, 2024).

For Russia, expanding its footprint in South Asia aligns with its Pivot to Asia policy, aimed at diversifying partnerships beyond India while

countering U.S. regional influence (Singha, 2025). With such a limited strategic involvement with Pakistan, Russia acquires indirect access to the Indian Ocean, which is of particular importance in terms of maritime transport of energy and trade. This aligns with Russia's long-term aspirations to assert its relevance as a global power with a presence beyond its traditional spheres of influence (Awan, 2024).

Additionally, Western sanctions following the Ukraine war have pushed Moscow to diversify arms export markets outside its traditional clientele (Feldstein & Brauer, 2024). Pakistan's interest in acquiring cost-effective Russian hardware and Pakistan's lack of direct involvement in Ukraine-related conflicts make it an attractive customer for Moscow's defence industry (Military Watch Magazine, 2019). Simultaneously, by supporting Pakistan's military modernization, Russia indirectly counters India's deepening security cooperation with the United States and other Quad members, maintaining leverage over New Delhi (Khan, 2021).

5.2 Friction Points

Although the two nations share interests, various structural constraints are affecting the quality of the Pakistan-Russia defence relationship. One major limitation is the fact that Russia has a long-term relationship with India in defence. Moscow remains India's largest arms supplier, providing platforms such as the S-400 air defence system and nuclear submarine leases that constitute critical elements of India's strategic capabilities (Mapari, 2024). While Russia seeks to diversify its partnerships, it remains cautious not to jeopardize its lucrative defence ties with New Delhi, leading to calibrated rather than expansive engagement with Pakistan (Schneider, 2025).

On the same note, Pakistan's alliance with China has become a complication to the relationship it has with Russia. While Moscow and Beijing share strategic alignment against Western hegemony, they also compete in Central Asia for influence and infrastructure projects (Zaheer, 2024). The position as a core hub in CPEC shrinks Pakistan into the Chinese strategic sphere and is likely to give Moscow limited options of asserting its influence without running into the interests of Beijing, particularly in the field of technology or high-profile infrastructure investment. Pakistan-Russia relations have become

more complex because of the Ukraine War. While Pakistan has sought to maintain neutrality, the possibility of secondary sanctions poses a real risk, particularly if Pakistan increases its defence purchases from Russia (Ali & Verma, 2024). Islamabad's fragile economic situation, including dependency on IMF programs and Western financial institutions, constrains its ability to engage in high-value defence deals with Russia without risking financial isolation or the withholding of critical economic support (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2024).

Additionally, Pakistan's domestic instability and persistent security challenges may limit the absorption of sophisticated Russian technologies, reducing the practical scope of cooperation beyond small-scale arms deals and training exercises (Pakistan Today, 2025). Conversely, Russia's economic challenges, exacerbated by sanctions, may restrict its ability to provide favorable credit terms for large-scale defence transactions, slowing the momentum of cooperation (Fenton & Kolyandr, 2025).

5.3 Strategic Implications

Nevertheless, even under such limits, the two nations still manage to find some ways of practical collaboration in these geopolitical realities. Russia's willingness to participate in counterterrorism drills, provide select defence hardware, and explore naval collaboration with Pakistan reflects a cautious yet consistent approach to building influence without alienating India or overcommitting amidst its broader strategic engagements (Mahmood, 2024).

Going forward, the sustainability of the Pakistan-Russia defence partnership will depend on the two states' ability to navigate these enabling and

constraining factors while maintaining a transactional, interest-driven approach (The Islamabad Telegraph, 2024). International forces, such as the reaction of the U.S. and the changing nature of the Indian/Russian relationships, will still dictate the bandwidth, however, within which the partnership will develop, and make it even more tentative yet strategically important component of both states' foreign policies.

6. Regional Reactions and Power Dynamics

The dynamic nature of the Pakistan and Russia military relationships draws great implications in the geopolitics in the region, especially on India, China, and the United States, all having an interest in the partnership as perceived in its military context vis-a-vis the security concerns and the geopolitical alliances.

A dilemma that is complexly diverging in India is the balancing of its historical defence relations with Russia and further strengthening the strategic relations with the United States, and continuing its role in the Quad. India has long depended on Russia to provide it with important defence systems, but it has recently been observed to diversify its arms imports. India is eager to modernize its army and avoid excessive dependence on Russian weapons; France has increased its arms exports to India by a factor of 36 times (to 33 percent of India-based imports) and the US by a factor of 1.6 (to 13 percent) between the years 2009-2013 and 2019-2023. This diversification aligns with India's broader strategy of enhancing its defence capabilities to address evolving security challenges while managing geopolitical risks (Figure 1) (Civildaily, 2024).

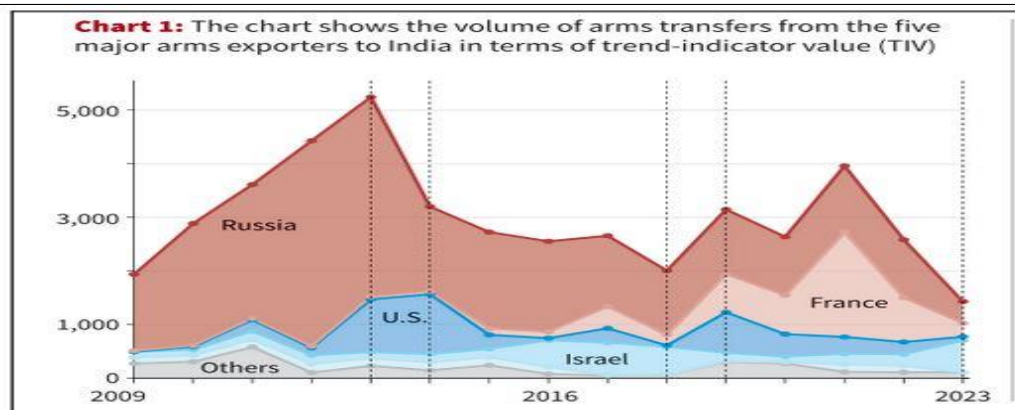


Figure 1: India's Arms Imports from Major Suppliers (2009–2023)

Source: *Civildaily* (2024). SIPRI

The growth of India to be the biggest arms importer in the world, being ahead of Saudi Arabia with the share rising to 9.8 percent from 9.1 percent in 2019 to 2023, shows that the country is serious about its militarization plans and is in the process of modernizing its military to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, Pakistan's share in global arms imports increased from 2.9% to 4.3%, reflecting Islamabad's efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities, including through emerging cooperation with Russia (Wezeman et al., 2024). India remains concerned that Pakistan–Russia ties, even if limited, could alter the regional military balance and provide Pakistan with diversified supply lines at a time when India is recalibrating its dependencies (Francis & Radhakrishnan, 2025).

China's perspective on Pakistan–Russia cooperation is shaped by its strategic interest in maintaining stability along the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Khan & Jamil, n.d.). While China remains Pakistan's primary defence supplier, it views Moscow's engagement with Islamabad as complementary rather than competitive, contributing to regional stability that benefits Chinese interests in Pakistan (Konwer, 2023). However, Beijing closely observes the character of the cooperation between Pakistan and Russia in the defence industry to make sure that it fits into its security calculations in the region. The United States, meanwhile, assesses the Pakistan–Russia relationship within the broader context of its efforts to manage strategic competition with Russia (Khan, 2024). While the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) is a tool available to deter significant

defence transactions with Russia, the United States has so far opted for diplomatic engagement with Pakistan to discourage deepening military-technological ties with Moscow while maintaining space for limited security cooperation with Islamabad, where interests align. Overall, the defence collaboration between Pakistan and Russia is arising in a situation of rearrangements in the area and alterations regarding partnering defence logistics. Diversification of arms suppliers and cutting dependence on Russia that occurred in India, as well as gradual diversification of defence in Pakistan, captures wider regional security shifts in positions. Such dynamics re-state the fact that the degree to which the Pakistan–Russia defence relationship is going on is not extensive but it is a strategic indicator to the fact that Islamabad is looking at diversification as much as its security relations within a multipolar environment at the same time as wrestling with its pre-existing alliances with China and the effects of the U.S. policy in the region.

7. Future Trajectories: Scenarios and Risks

7.1 Optimistic Scenario: Energy-Defence Nexus and SCO Frameworks

In a scenario that presupposes positive development, Pakistan and Russia may intensify their collaboration in the sphere of defence through the use of energy trade as a source of funds used to buy arms. Recent agreements for discounted Russian crude oil sales to Pakistan (Energy Update, 2024) provide Islamabad with fiscal breathing room, which could indirectly facilitate the procurement of Russian defence technologies while diversifying Pakistan's energy

sources. Such energy-defence coupling aligns with Russia's strategy to use energy exports to sustain its economy under Western sanctions while expanding its geopolitical influence in South Asia (Awan, 2024). Additionally, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) could evolve into a platform facilitating trilateral counterterrorism collaboration among China, Pakistan, and Russia. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has previously served as a venue for intelligence sharing and joint exercises targeting regional terror threats. By institutionalizing cooperative frameworks under SCO auspices, Islamabad and Moscow can embed their bilateral security cooperation within a multilateral architecture, thereby reducing friction with India and the United States while advancing shared security objectives in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Khan, 2024).

7.2 Pessimistic Scenario: Sanctions and Strategic Strains

Several risks could derail this optimistic trajectory. The ongoing Ukraine War has heightened the possibility of secondary sanctions on countries engaging in significant trade with Russia, creating uncertainty for Pakistan's emerging energy and defence dealings with Moscow (Fabbri, 2023). The economy of Pakistan is already in a bad shape, and therefore, this can inhibit its capability of coping with such measures, which may result in a reluctance to increase defence purchases in Russia.

The defence relations between India and Russia are also another possible source of friction. Despite India's diversification toward Western defence suppliers, its continued procurement of advanced Russian systems such as the S-400 missile defence system maintains Moscow's strategic stake in India's security calculus (Singh & Kour, 2024). New or larger arm deals with Pakistan may jeopardise the balancing act on which Russia is engaged; this would result in a stall or dilution of the defence ties between Russia and Pakistan under Indian pressure.

Further, regional geopolitical developments—such as escalations along the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LOC) or a potential destabilization of Afghanistan—could shift Moscow's threat perceptions, limiting its engagement with Pakistan to avoid entanglement in South Asian conflicts.

7.3 Technology Horizons: Emerging Areas of Collaboration

With these limitations, however, technological cooperation offers a realistic route that would see the gradual intensification of defence relationships. Pakistan's interest in acquiring advanced Russian drones and electronic warfare systems aligns with its efforts to modernize its armed forces while enhancing border security along the Afghan frontier (Defence News, 2024). Russia's willingness to co-develop or transfer such technologies, particularly in areas like counter-drone measures and electronic intelligence, could expand the scope of bilateral defence cooperation (TN Web Desk, 2024). Space-based surveillance also represents a promising domain for collaboration. As Pakistan seeks to enhance its satellite reconnaissance capabilities for monitoring border areas and securing CPEC routes, Russia's extensive experience in satellite technologies and launch capabilities could become a valuable asset, provided concerns over technology transfer restrictions are effectively managed (Defence News, 2024).

Another area of emerging cooperation will be cybersecurity, however, in light of recent increases in transnational cyberattacks on critical infrastructures around the region. Joint development of cybersecurity frameworks and capacity-building programs could further institutionalize Pakistan-Russia security ties while addressing shared vulnerabilities (Bano, 2021).

7.4 Managing Risks and Seizing Opportunities

The foothold of Pakistan-Russia defence relations will depend on their capacity to walk a fine line between opportunities and systemic limitations. This partnership will be defined by speed and strength in the play between Western sanctions, India-Russia relationships, Pakistan-China cooperation, and the changing security environment in Afghanistan.

When handled properly, the pragmatic alliance between Pakistan and Russia has the potential to evolve into a well-organized, multi-faceted relationship that would benefit the interests of both nation-states in areas of security and economic prosperity and strengthen their stature as independent actors in a multi-polar world. Nevertheless, any errors, notably the failure to take into consideration the secondary

outcomes of the external pressures, may cause the partnership to fall into stagnation or rollback.

8. Recommendations for Sustainable Cooperation

8.1 Policy Level: Institutionalizing Defence Cooperation

In their effort to become more rigid in their defence relationship, Pakistan and Russia ought to formalise the defence agreements like a Logistics Exchange Agreement, which allows the two nations to have mutual access to their ports and airbases to refuel, repair, and traverse together. This would enhance operational readiness while signalling long-term commitment. Moreover, to eliminate the threat of sanctions, suspension of bilateral trade and defence cooperation, the two nations are to develop a payment system in rupee-ruble or other currency, which can be backed by dedicated banking systems to make energy and defence dealings.

8.2 Operational Level: Enhancing Security Collaboration

The next operational level should be the development of the scope of the naval exercise in the Arabian Sea with advanced capabilities like anti-submarine warfare, maritime surveillance, to enhance the maritime security position of Pakistan, besides providing operational exposure to Russia in the Indian Ocean. The bilateral security cooperation would be heightened further by the creation of multilateral rapid-response teams to deal with counterterrorism operations aimed at Afghanistan-centric threats. These forces would integrate the counterinsurgency as well as the regional intelligence networks of both Russia and Pakistan, enabling them to respond quickly to the emerging security threats within the common periphery of the two nations.

8.3 Diplomatic Level: Leveraging Multilateral Platforms

On a more diplomatic note, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation could be utilised in integrating the Pakistan-Russia defence cooperation into an extended regional security system and thus cooling down the tension with the neighbours at the same time. The two nations can leverage their roles in the SCO in establishing confidence-building measures that help in facilitating dialogue with

limited chances of regional spillover to hold bilateral defence relations.

Moreover, Pakistan and Russia may offer themselves as neutral forces in Afghanistan in an attempt to promote an inclusive model of governance as well as engage in joint actions to combat terrorism and trafficking of narcotics. Such synchronisation of diplomatic visits helps them to maximise the ability to contribute towards the development of the security around the region without jeopardising the independence of the foreign policies therein.

9. Conclusion

The developing Pakistan-Russia defence alliance is overcoming the paralysis of the Cold War hostility, and a great example of how geopolitical currents (which switch between opposite directions) can allow hostile states to amicably co-operate on pragmatic grounds. Though there is no official alliance, the relationship is transactional but strong convergence prompted by a common need for security, including through counterterrorism, maintaining stability in Afghanistan, and a lack of overdependence on any single power block.

The collaboration is also a reflection of the agency of middle powers in an environment of a growingly multipolar system and goes to show that they can competently straddle between competing forces of great power rivalries whilst protecting national interests. Pakistan would get avenues of bolstering military modernization, fortification of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and weaning off the reliance on any external patron, in particular. Among Pakistani attractions to Russia, there is a projection point toward the Indian Ocean, an extra market for non-Western gun sales, and an opportunity to broaden its Pivot to Asia to non-traditional allies.

Yet, this evolving partnership is not without constraints. Russia-India defence relations history, Pakistan and China relations, and a possible effect of the Ukraine conflict sanctions on spillover into Pakistan are serious points of balance challenges. Both states should balance such tensions without becoming mixed-up, simultaneously concentrating on joint goals while managing to keep away from shedding their respective strategic autoemoies.

As a forecast, the Pakistan-Russia defence relationship can be considered as an example of how previously hostile states can be reconciled by simultaneously

understanding the changing security requirements and regional roles. This will be sustainable by the ways in which the two countries will manage to institutionalize cooperation and operational synergies also as well as relying on multilateral forums without being caught up by external pressure. By doing that, Pakistan and Russia are not only revising bilateral relations, but also serving the emergence of a more pluralist security system in a changing world order.

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