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Invasion of Ukraine

Imran Khan in Moscow: Pakistan-Russia Realigning?

By Anne-Marie Schleich

SYNOPSIS

Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent visit to Moscow during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine could be an indicator of a policy shift towards a more independent Pakistani foreign policy after the US Afghanistan exit.

COMMENTARY

ON THE night of 23 February 2022, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan arrived in Moscow for a two-day visit – just hours after his host President Vladimir Putin launched the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The timing of PM Khan's visit must have been purely fortuitous as official visits are usually prepared well in advance.

Still there had been critical voices in Pakistan and in Western countries questioning the wisdom to go ahead with the long-planned visit of PM Khan to Moscow. The fact that he went ahead suggests the trip was of strategic significance. Is PM Khan undertaking a major foreign policy shift? Is Pakistan moving towards a more independent foreign policy following the US exit from Afghanistan?



*Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan during an official visit to Moscow
23-25 February 2022: Image from en.kremlin.ru*

Groundbreaking Visit Amid Geopolitical Quake

PM Khan's visit to Moscow was the first by a Pakistani prime minister in 23 years. Two days later, on 25 February, President Putin and him had a three-hour long working lunch — one day after Russian military forces invaded Ukraine. Ahead of the trip, the US had made it clear to Pakistan that it would be watching this visit very closely.

Defending his trip, PM Khan maintained that mainly bilateral issues were discussed. It was later disclosed that Pakistan would purchase two million tonnes of wheat as well as natural gas from Russia.

More significantly, a Pakistani communique stated PM Khan had stressed that the Ukraine conflict was not in anyone's interests, underlining that disputes should be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy. But — like his Indian counterpart Prime Minister Narendra Modi — PM Khan did not condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There did not seem to be much domestic pressure for him to do so.

His foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, in a call to his Ukrainian counterpart on 27 February, underscored that “de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy” was important. A government source told the newspaper ‘Dawn’ on 1 March: “Pakistan decided not to take sides. Islamabad supports a peaceful and negotiated settlement.”

Diplomatic Reactions to Visit

In an unprecedented open letter, 21 Islamabad-based diplomatic envoys of European and other Western countries urged Pakistan on the same day to condemn the Russian invasion during the UN General Assembly (UNGA) session. In the ongoing UNGA

meeting, Josep Borell, High Representative of the EU on Foreign Affairs, called his Pakistani counterpart to discuss the Ukraine situation. Pakistan — like India — abstained from the vote on the resolution.

The Pakistani ambassador also did not mention Russia in his speech which emphasised that Pakistan “upholds the principle of equal and indivisible security for all” — a reference to Russia’s concerns.

One of the main bilateral discussion points between Putin and Khan in Moscow was their bilateral economic flagship project, the “Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline”. In 2019, Russia had committed investing up to US\$14 billion in Pakistan’s energy sector. Pakistan has fast-declining domestic gas reserves though gas still remains an important part of its energy mix.

In 2015, Russia and Pakistan agreed to build a 1,100 km-long LNG pipeline from Karachi to supply power plants in the Punjab province with a planned capacity of about 12 billion cubic metres. US sanctions on one of the three Russian companies involved delayed the project, but an agreement was signed in November 2021.

Pakistan had also granted Russia access to its Gwadar port — one of the main hubs for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. Western sanctions on Russian companies and banks in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine could affect this bilateral project.

Evolving Pakistan-Russia Relations

The development of Pakistan-Russian relations has been remarkable considering that for many years, they were frozen, especially during and after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Cold War. Things began to move only after 9/11. It started after an increasing estrangement between Pakistan and the US as well as a closer US relationship with India during the Clinton and Trump administrations.

In 2011, Russia officially supported Pakistan’s bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) emphasising that Pakistan was an important partner for Russia in South Asia and the Muslim world.

In 2013, the first Russia-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue was established and in 2014, Russia lifted its arms embargo on Pakistan and started to sell weapons to the country. The annual Pak-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) on trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation started its work in 2015. Bilateral trade, however, remains low; Russia is not among Pakistan’s 10 biggest trading partners.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pakistan in April 2021, the first visit of a Russian foreign minister since 2012. Before Pakistan, however, Lavrov had visited India, Pakistan’s arch enemy and a country with close Russian defence technology ties.

It also coincided with closer cooperation of the four Quad nations US, Japan, India and Australia. A Pakistani government communique stated after his visit: “The cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad is based on the coincidence or similarity

of positions on most of the problems of the world community, including issues of strategic stability and countering terrorism".

Imran Khan's Geopolitical Moves: A New Power Triangle?

The Lavrov visit focused on "cooperation in the trade, economic and counter-terrorism fields and on topical issues of the international and regional agenda". The deteriorating civil war situation in Afghanistan last year was "a common concern" during these talks.

Both countries also agreed during the Lavrov visit on joint military exercises and on increasing Pakistan's ability to fight terrorism. Russia was worried about a continuing instability in Afghanistan and recognised Pakistan's leverage with the Taliban. The Pakistan-Russia Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) has met three times, the last time in September 2021.

Increasing investment, military and political engagement between Russia and Pakistan seems to complement Pakistan's close economic and military ties with China. The \$62 billion multi-project CPEC is China's flagship venture under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Pakistan wants Chinese technological know-how and financing to help upgrade its power plant infrastructure, stimulate economic growth and develop Pakistan into a regional economic hub. If Russia can assist with gas and gas pipelines, it will enhance both China's and Pakistan's targets.

PM Khan's visit to Moscow during the ongoing Russian invasion could be a harbinger of a further upgrading of bilateral relations, especially after Islamabad withstood recent international pressure. The combination of closer and visible Pakistani ties with both China and Russia could point to a new tripartite geopolitical gravity centre in South Asia.

After the US Afghanistan exit, Foreign Minister Qureshi had already talked about a policy shift towards an independent Pakistani foreign policy. In these geopolitically challenging and fast changing times, this development is likely to be followed closely by the US, India and other regional and global players.

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