

RATIONAL CHOICES AND SELECTIVE COOPERATION: A RATIONAL ACTOR MODEL ANALYSIS OF PAKISTAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Komal Malik* & Asma Rashid**

Abstract

Despite repeated attempts to upgrade bilateral relationships over more than three decades, Russia and Pakistan have not been able to achieve milestones except for breaking a thaw in their ties. Russia is believed to have a clear tilt towards India and to avoid taking steps that can annoy New Delhi while engaging with Pakistan. However, its tilt towards India and the lack of formidable relations with Pakistan, based on strong foundations in defence and the economy, can better be understood in terms of the utility maximization of these countries for each other. When Russia and Pakistan see their utility for accomplishing national interests, they become natural partners. This trend sees selective cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, even when one takes the Indian factor as a constant. At the same time, both countries tend to balance their desires with compulsions in their foreign policies vis-à-vis the US, China, and India. Furthermore, Russia's traditional defence and economic ties with India are the main hindrance to the upgradation of relations between the two countries. However, these factors in the context of India are better understood when they are explained through the principle of utility maximization. Nonetheless, this article has applied the rational actor model of foreign policy to understand the relationship equation between Russia, Pakistan, and India. This article finds that Russia and Pakistan have advanced their bilateral relations when their interests converge, and both see each other's utility maximization through cooperation. Hence, India, as a

* An independent researcher specializing in Pakistan's foreign policy and its engagement with major global powers. She is currently pursuing her PhD at the International Islamic University Islamabad, where she is advancing her expertise in IR.

** Postdoctoral Fellow, Islamic Research Institute (IRI) and Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: : asma.rashid@iiu.edu.pk

restraining factor in the Pakistan-Russia relationship, is better understood through the lens of the rational actor model, guided by the utility-maximization principle.

Keywords: Pakistan-Russia relationship, defence ties, economy, Pakistan-India partnership, utility maximization, rational actor model

Introduction

After Pakistan's independence in 1947, it emerged in a world system marked by Cold War bipolarity. The country faced security challenges as it sought to strengthen its defense system against its neighbor, India. Security became Pakistan's top priority. Pakistani strategists and policymakers, as rational actors, shaped foreign policy around this threat, focusing narrowly on security. Since independence, Pakistan's foreign policy has stressed cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and friendly relations with all states. Initially, Pakistan favored non-alignment (1947-1953), but this neutrality was brief. Political, social, and economic vulnerabilities, plus threats from India and Afghanistan, forced Pakistan into a period of alliances to address these challenges. Policymakers weighed available options and chose what supported national security and favored foreign policy goals.¹ Despite invitations from both America and the USSR to join their blocs, Pakistan chose the US. This decision was due to its security dilemmas during the Cold War alignments. The geopolitical situation made Pakistan-USSR relations cold, pushing the USSR to ally with India to balance power in South Asia. During the Cold War, Pakistan and the USSR tried to build cordial ties, mainly in energy and metallurgy. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the USSR assisted with projects like the Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDCL)² and Pakistan Steel Mills. Yet, opposing security alliances and regional interests prevented major defense cooperation, except for a limited deal for Maverick helicopters in 1969.³ Relations worsened after the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship,⁴ which deepened the India-USSR partnership. Pakistan's support for the anti-jihad movement in Afghanistan during the 1980s further strained relations.

¹ Khan, Muhammad Taimur Fahad. "Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Russia." *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2019): 89-104. https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/6-SS_Muhammad_Taimur_Fahad_Khan_No-3_2019.pdf

² Ibid

³ Khan, Muhammad. "The Evolving Nature of Pakistan-Russia Strategic Relationship." *Strategic Thought* 7, no. 1 (2025): 19-34. <https://strategiethought.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/116/96>

⁴ ibid

However, the International system supports the idea that there are no permanent friends or enemies.⁵ The post-Cold War era witnessed a gradual process of restoring diplomatic engagement between Pakistan and Russia. Enhanced defence cooperation was witnessed with joint military exercises, known as Druzhba (Friendship), in 2016, and potential collaboration with the CPEC. High-level meetings further identified shared interests, and Russia supported Pakistan's SCO membership, harboring a growing partnership. The defence ties were further strengthened with Russia's support for Pakistan's stance on Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) membership,⁶ full membership of SCO in 2017, and Russian arms transfers to Pakistan, such as Mi-35 attack helicopters and Kornet-E anti-tank missiles. This bilateral relationship helped lessen Pakistan's reliance on Western aid and diversify its diplomatic relations. The formation of an institutional mechanism, such as the Russia-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC),⁷ further aids the intent to deepen this evolving partnership.⁸

The argument advanced here is that despite consistent high-level political engagement to strengthen bilateral relations, Pakistan and Russia have been unable to elevate their relationship to the level of a meaningful strategic partnership. The absence of a robust economic foundation remains the principal barrier, preventing the partnership from acquiring resilience and strategic coherence.

This article seeks to explain Russia and Pakistan relations through the lens of utility maximization. Where utility is measured by analyzing four variables of geopolitical engagement, energy relations, economy and trade, and defence and security cooperation. The volume of imports and exports in the economic and defence sectors can help in understanding the utility of both countries for each other. Thus, the rational actor model explains that foreign policy decisions are more likely to be influenced by the utility principle. When perceived benefits from any decision outweigh the cost, the decision is more likely to be taken, and vice versa.

At last, this article employs qualitative methodology. The data is collected from primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, official documents and statements are taken to help. For secondary sources, books, research articles, reports, news, and policy briefs are used. Furthermore, the studies on

⁵ Xiaochuang Han, Eunsol Choi, and Chenhao Tan. "No permanent friends or enemies: Tracking relationships between nations from news." *arXiv preprint arXiv: 1904.08950* (2019).

⁶ Muhammad Murad, Muhammad Ramzan Kolachi, and Uroosa Ishfaq. "Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership: The case of India and Pakistan." *Global Political Review* 3, no. 2 (2018): 31-39.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Hafeez Ullah Khan, "Pakistan-Russia relations and the changing paradigm." *J. Pol. Stud.* 26 (2019): 231.

Russia-Pakistan relations have been conducted since the turn of the 21st century. However, they either exaggerate the relations between the two countries or ignore the role of India in the formation of sustainable bilateral relations between the two countries. By analyzing the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan through the lens of utility maximization and identifying India as an irritant in these relations, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature review.

Rising Pakistan-Russia Partnership

The shifting regional and global alignments brought opportunities for Pakistan and Russia's enhanced relationship. Though there are certain limitations that persist in their interactions, including the Indo-Russian strategic partnership, Indo-Pakistan mistrust, and Pakistan's over-reliance on China. Nevertheless, Russia and Pakistan have made several attempts to revive their relationship, including telephonic conversations Putin had with the Indian and the Pakistani leaders after the Taliban took over Kabul on August 15, 2021. After the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the West turned its back. Russia's foreign policy of 'Pivot to Asia' and the Western sanctions compelled Russia to extend ties with Pakistan after India in order to minimize Russia's political and economic deficit, whereas Pakistan might use this opportunity to strengthen the diplomatic and commercial ties with Russia.⁹ Pakistan expressed its displeasure with the Ukraine crisis while refraining from voting against Russia in the UNGA. Pakistan also imported Russian crude oil on discounted rates despite Western sanctions, in order to build a pragmatic partnership.

Moreover, during economic inflation, Pakistan increasingly turns towards Russian oil to bolster its energy security, and following the Western isolation of Russia diplomatically and economically, Russia seeks alternative energy markets, including Pakistan. However, there are certain restraining factors that cause significant structural limitations constraining Pakistan's ability to import Russian crude.¹⁰ Pakistan's refining capacity is largely connected with the Middle Eastern countries where Pakistan sources almost 80 percent of its oil requirements from. Logistical barriers further complicate imports from Russia.

⁹ Usman Ali, and Tauseef Javed. "Pakistan-Russia Emerging Cooperation: Opportunities And Challenges." *Margalla Papers* 28, no. 1 (2024): 141-160. <https://cssplatformbytha.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PAKISTAN-RUSSIA-EMERGING-COOPERTION-OPPORTUNITIES-AND-CHALLENGES.pdf>

¹⁰ Ahmed Adeel Ahmed, and Zeeshan Memon. "Pakistan and Russia: Economic and Trade Relations." *The Asian Bulletin of Green Management and Circular Economy* 4, no. 2 (2024): 4-2.

Theoretical Framework

The Rational Actor Model developed by Graham Allison assumes that states behave as unitary, rational actors that develop foreign policy choices by calculating costs and benefits to maximize national interests. Rational Actor Model's utility maximization principle can explain the barriers as well as progress in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Both states have engaged on multiple occasions as rational choices of decision makers, where the interests of both countries have converged. Mostly, the avenues of engagement between both countries are primarily limited to low politics areas. Even Russia's convergence of interests with Pakistan during the Afghan Peace Process was based on the lens of non-traditional security in the counterterrorism domain. Therefore, Moscow engages Islamabad, even at the expense of India, where its utility for its national interests seems to be higher than that of engaging with New Delhi.

However, India will continue to remain a major irritant in the bilateral relations between both countries, not just because of the historical legacy of their strong partnership, but because India's utility for Russia far outweighs that of Pakistan. This analysis of bilateral relations between India and Russia is deterministic and leaves very few avenues for Russia and Pakistan to mature their cooperation from non-traditional areas into the traditional security domain. So, the application of the rational actor model and the utility maximization principle is essential to understand the current trajectory of bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan for two reasons. First, it helps in understanding why India is an important factor and irritant in Pakistan-Russia relations. Secondly, Russia's close strategic partnership with India is not a dead end for Pakistan. If Russia and Pakistan jointly maximize each other's utility, India's role in bilateral relations between the two countries can be considerably minimized over time.

This article has identified four areas where India's utility for Russia outweighs that of Pakistan's. Russia's utility for India is also greater than that of other major powers, the United States and China. Despite India's defence and strategic partnership with Washington, New Delhi cherishes the principle of strategic autonomy in its foreign policy, which sometimes contradicts US interests in the region. With China, its relations have not been cordial due to the border conflict between the two regional powers in 2019. So, Russia continues to serve as a reliable option for New Delhi for its defence and economic needs.

In the case of Pakistan, it desires to build close relationships with Russia based on strategic and economic partnerships. However, its elites do not see having such relations as compulsory and indispensable for Pakistan's national interest. Its dependence on the United States, the European Union, and primarily China for defence and economic needs shows Moscow is not indispensable to Islamabad. Therefore, this article has explored the following

four factors in the relationships between Russia and Pakistan, which can elaborate on the nature of the relationship between both countries. These factors are: 1) Selective Cooperation, 2) Strategic Defence, 3) Economic and Energy Dependence, and 4) Desirability vs Compulsion.

1) Selective Cooperation

In the 21st century, Pakistan-Russia relationship has improved from the cold war era low; they have remained limited to selective cooperation instead of transforming into strategic cooperation. This selective engagement between both countries is issue-specific, rather than strategic, in the areas of energy, diplomatic exchanges, joint military exercises, counterterrorism cooperation, maritime cooperation, growing business interaction, and limited defence cooperation based on the principle of utility maximization for both countries. The dictum from British Prime Minister Palmerston's speech, "there are no permanent friends and eternal enemies in international relations, only the interests of countries are permanent and eternal," better explains this selective cooperation.

Russia and Pakistan entered 21st century with a thaw in bilateral relations a distant reality. The Cold War's antagonism, Pakistan's role in the Soviet-Afghan war, and Islamabad's support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its alleged support for extremist outfits did not allow relations between the two countries to follow a positive trajectory after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Russia feared Pakistan was behind the alleged American design to disintegrate Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation by providing support to Muslims of Bosnia, Chechnya, the Caucasus, and Dagestan.¹¹ Despite the best efforts of Pakistan under Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in their second terms, through a liaison relationship between the ISI and the Russian intelligence over sharing counterterrorism and counter-narcotics information and periodic consultations between the Afghan experts of the two Foreign Offices, trust and confidence in bilateral relations were not developed. This is evident from the fact that in April 2001, Russia sought sanctions on Pakistan for aiding the Afghan Taliban.¹²

¹¹ Claudia Chia, and Zheng Haiqi. "Russia-Pakistan economic relations: Energy partnership and the China factor." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4, no. 4 (2021): 20-36. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/russia-pakistan-economic-relations-energy-partnership-and-the-china-factor/>

¹² Ivan U Klyszcz, "Russia and the Taliban takeover." *research paper, Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique* 17 (2021): 2021. <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2021/172021-02.pdf>

Russia and Pakistan put sincere efforts to improve bilateral relations when they perceived each other's utility-maximizing due to regional and global developments. For Pakistan, Russia's utility in its foreign policy increased when the United States reinforced the arms embargo on Islamabad under the Pressler Amendment in the 1990s. After Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif failed to motivate the Clinton Administration to lift the ban on the export of arms, including ammunition, to Pakistan. This made Pakistan put sincere efforts into diversifying its defence relations and imports beyond the United States.

While Russia saw Pakistan's utility in its foreign relations increasing to counter non-traditional security challenges, particularly after the Global War on Terror. In the post-Cold War world, the challenges to Russia's security were emanating from non-traditional sources. The security cooperation between Pakistan and Russia would deal with non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, narcotics and drug trafficking, illegal flow of light weapons, environmental pollution, energy and water conflicts, and so forth. When Pakistan became a frontline ally of the United States in the Global War on Terror, Russia also sought to enhance bilateral cooperation with the latter. In fact, Russia and Pakistan have shown consistent convergence of interests on Afghanistan and counterterrorism from the start of the Global War on Terror, Afghanistan's Peace Process, and post-American withdrawal Afghanistan under the interim government of the Taliban. This is the only area of convergence of interests where Russia has not bothered about its bilateral relations with India while engaging with Pakistan. In 2002, during the military standoff between Pakistan and India, Putin sought to diffuse tensions between the two nuclear-armed countries instead of siding with India.¹³ Apart from this, Russia continued with trilateral and quadrilateral dialogue on Afghanistan despite India's strong disdain for the group.

Furthermore, Russia seeks to promote multilateralism at global and regional levels, which provides both countries with an opportunity to align their interests in promoting a multilateral order. Russia favors multilateralism to reduce American dominance of global affairs. Pakistan sees multilateralism as an opportunity to reduce its dependence on the United States. This resulted Musharraf seeking the support of Putin for Pakistan's SCO membership in 2006.¹⁴ Currently, Pakistan considers Russia's role as critical to becoming a member of BRICS.¹⁵ In 2024, Pakistan also accepted President Putin's offer

¹³ Shabana Naeem, and Shabnam Kausar. "Kashmir Issue During Musharraf Era: A Diplomatic Shift Towards Peace." *Social Science Review Archives* 3, no. 2 (2025): 383-394. <https://policyjournalofms.com/index.php/6/article/view/624/653>

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

to join the International Transport Corridor.¹⁶ The following table explains the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan based on bilateral cooperation:

Sector	Key Engagements & Developments
Energy	• Barter trade agreement signed to avoid Western sanctions (2022-24) • Discounted Russian crude oil import to Pakistan (2023) • Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (MoU 2015; multiple rounds 2016-2021) • Negotiations on LNG, gas supply and pipeline connectivity
Trade & Economy	• Russia offers revival of Steel Mills • MoU signed between Central Bank of Russian Federation and State Bank of Pakistan-increasing bilateral trade significantly • In 2023, Pakistan received its first shipment of discounted Russian crude oil and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG)
Defence & Security	• In 2014, Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed • Sale of Mi-35 helicopters • Annual Druzhba joint military exercises since 2016 • Naval visits, training exchanges and drills

Source: Developed by the Author.

2) Desirability vs Compulsion

The elements of desirability and compulsion in the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan help in understanding their ties from a multilateral perspective. These elements are important to contextualize the relations among Pakistan, Russia, the United States, China, and India. Nevertheless, Pakistan has always desired to have a cordial relationship with Russia or the erstwhile Soviet Union since its independence. However, Pakistan’s desire to improve bilateral relations has hardly transformed into compulsion. Nonetheless, any overture by Pakistan to normalize its relations with Russia is more pointed at Washington instead of Moscow itself. In fact, Russia’s (Soviet Union) role in the foreign policy of Pakistan has been that of a bargaining chip to align and realign itself with the United States.¹⁷ Even the recent Russia-Ukraine war, when Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan was visiting Russia on the same day of the invasion, opened the avenues for

¹⁶ Najeeb Ullah and Muhammad Abbas Brohi. "International north-south transport corridor: Challenges and opportunities for Pakistan." *Stratagem* 1, no. 1 (2018): 100-113.

¹⁷ Afsah Qazi, Muhammad Shoaib, and Muhammad Faisal. "Russia–Ukraine War and the indo-pacific: A perspective from Pakistan." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 1 (2025): 617-634. [Russia-Ukraine war_Pakistan perspective .pdf](#)

Pakistan to realign with the United States after Islamabad became irrelevant to Washington's foreign policy for almost a decade. This is the reason that Pakistan's initial response of neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine war changed when its Army Chief, General Bajwa, raised criticism on Russia's invasion but also reaffirmed Washington's centrality in accordance with its relations with Pakistan. A robust relation with the United States ensures continued access to economic assistance and security support, and advanced military technologies, which are essential for Pakistan to maintain a strategic balance against the Indian threat.¹⁸ Thus, Pakistan's desire is always overshadowed by its compulsion to counter India, which it believes cannot be ensured with the support of Russia.

To add more, Pakistan and Russia do not see long-term utility in each other when the former compares its relations with Moscow vis-à-vis the US and China, and later compares its relations with Islamabad vis-à-vis India. For Pakistan, the US and China's utility for its defence and economic needs is greater than that of Russia. In the same manner, Russia considers India as a more important partner for its defence and economic utility. India is the largest importer of Russian defence products historically and one of the largest emerging markets for the export of Russian hydrocarbons. Most importantly, Pakistan always considers Russia playing a secondary role in Pakistan's defence imports to reduce its dependence on the US. After the implementation of the Pressler Amendment in the 1990s, renewed calls for defence import diversification were heard in Islamabad. Prime Minister Nawaz Shareef even visited Russia in his second term to improve bilateral relations between the two countries. However, this desire was also subdued after Islamabad increasingly relied on China as its secondary, now primary, source for its defence imports. Secondly, Pakistan considers it a strength that it imports defence equipment from a country whose military hardware is inaccessible to India to ensure the element of surprise. Thirdly, the military victory of Pakistan over India in its recent 5th May, 2025 Conflict with vis-à-vis India has reinforced the edge of American and Chinese military equipment over that of Russia. Pakistan has claimed to destroy one Russian-made battery of S-400¹⁹, often cherished as the most advanced Air Defence System, and a Sukhoi fighter jet. However, it did not come into the limelight due to downing of French-made Rafale fighter jets by Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan's understanding that its defence requirements vis-à-vis India are met better with the US and China's help, even when it lacks the support of Russia, stands valid.

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Huaxia, "Pakistani Jets Destroy Air Defense System in India's Punjab," Xinhua News Agency, May 10, 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250510/8db95ed002b84d229272289fca5b789b/c.html>

Now, it is important to compare Russia's defence, economic, and energy relations with Pakistan and India in a bilateral context to understand which country has based its relations with Moscow on a strong foundation.

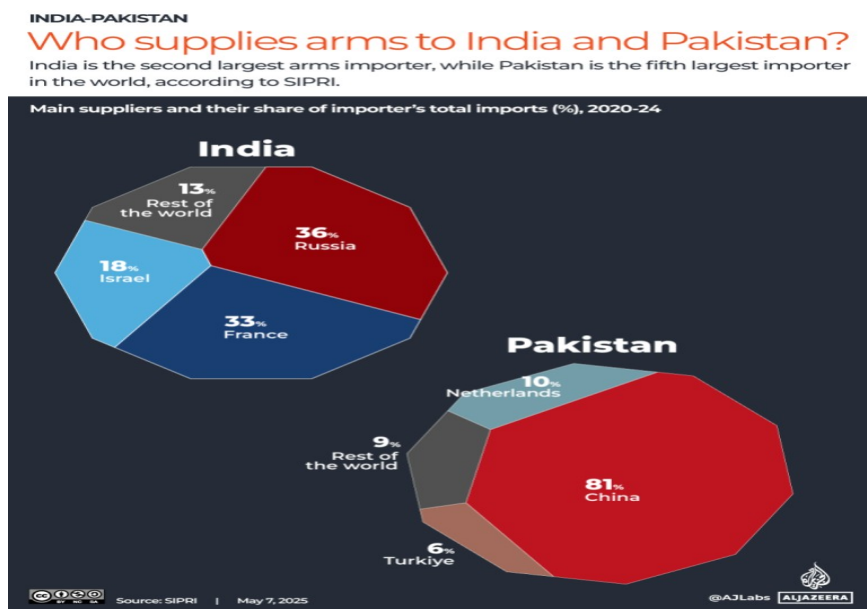
2) Strategic Defence Relationship

October 2025 marked the silver jubilee of India-Russia strategic partnership since the signing of the 'declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership' in October 2000. The India-Russia strategic partnership involves an advanced level of defence, security, trade and economy, political, cultural, scientific and technological, and P2P ties. Moreover, this bilateral relationship was elevated to 'special and privileged Strategic Partnership' in 2010, marking a deeper level of trust and collaboration. The defence and security cooperation between India and Russia has shifted from a buyer-seller framework to one involving joint research, development, and production of advanced defence technologies, such as the joint development of BrahMos Cruise Missiles. Other than that, both countries are also involved in other major joint military programs, including the 5th generation fighter jet program, S-400 Triumf, and Sukhoi Su-30MKI. India has also purchased various other military hardware from Russia. In addition, India has advanced its 'Make in India' initiative through several major defense collaborations with Russia, including the production of the Kamov Ka-226 helicopters and the licensed manufacture of over 1,000 T-90's Bhishma tanks within India. Other notable developments include cooperation on the Akula-II nuclear submarine and discussions surrounding the Tu-22M3 bomber platform. Military cooperation is further reinforced through joint exercises such as the INDRA naval drills conducted between the two countries. Similarly, Avia-Indra, an annual force exercise initiated in 2014, was first held in Astrakhan region of Russia, followed by its second phase in Halwara, India. These exercises are primarily aimed at enhancing operational interoperability and improving joint training capabilities between the armed forces of both states.

In comparison to the Indo-Russian defence relationship, Pakistan-Russia defence ties lack strategic depth, scale, and scope. Pakistan-Russia defence relations may require more time to strengthen, as they are largely limited to selective arms supplies, military exercises like Dhruzba and Arabian Monsoon, and a 2014 defence cooperation agreement. Russia supplied Pakistan with Mi-35 gunship helicopters. Both countries have also engaged in high-level visits between their military leaderships, fostering closer cooperation through naval exchanges, tactical drills, and collaboration between special forces. Beyond these high-level exchanges, Pakistan-Russia joint military exercises titled 'Friendship' have become a consistent feature of their defense relationship. The third such exercise held in October 2018

further strengthened Pakistan-Russia technical cooperation. Pakistan also participated in the SCO member states' Joint Military Anti-Terrorist Command Staff exercise called 'Peace Mission-2018' in Russia.

India-Russia defence partnership has a strong historical foundation that Pakistan-Russia defence ties lack. Russia, considering India as its longstanding strategic prioritization and multi-billion-dollar defence market, is careful not to jeopardize its relationship by providing Pakistan with a defence technology transfer. Pakistan's request for the S-400 air defence system was denied by Russia because it could make India uncomfortable, tilt the regional balance of power, and trigger geopolitical implications.



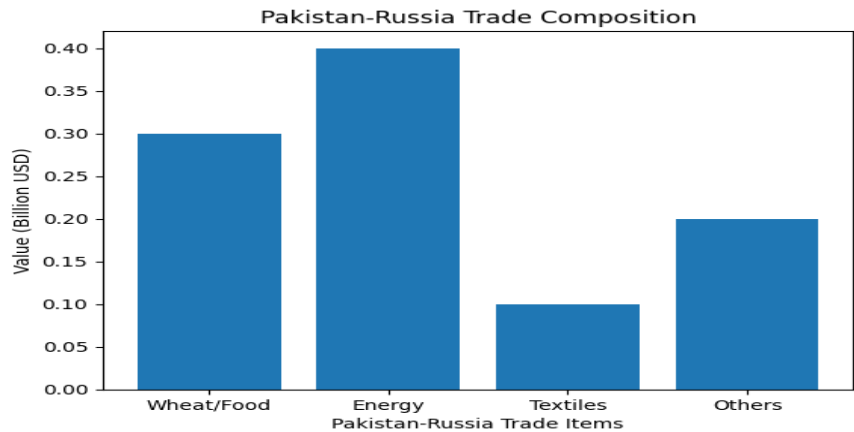
Source: Chughtai, Alia What are India and Pakistan's military capabilities', 2025. Aljazeera.<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/8/what-are-india-and-pakistans-military-and-nuclear-capabilities>

3) Economic and Energy Dependence

The year 1999 marked a major milestone in the Pak-Russia relationship, as Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, undertook a high-level visit from Pakistan to Russia – the first such visit in 25 years. During this engagement, both states agreed to grant each other Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, signaling a renewed commitment to strengthening bilateral ties. An agreement was further signed between the two states on trade and economic cooperation, incorporating non-discriminatory treatment of each other in taxes, methods of payment, and customs. However, the government excluded any preferential treatment provided that either country extended

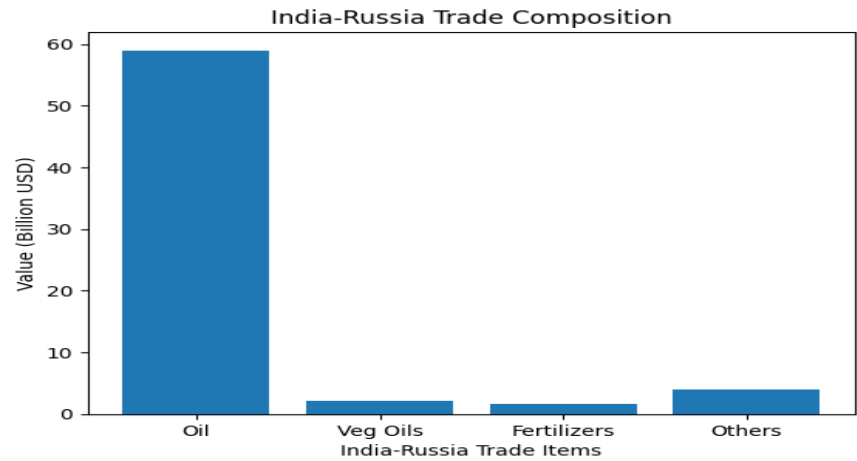
within regional groupings such as SAARC. This visit, though, resulted in the signing of three agreements, including an agreement on trade cooperation to promote trade between the two countries, a barter trade agreement, and, thirdly, the creation of the Joint Ministerial Commission of the two countries to facilitate annual meetings at the ministerial level. Although both states maintained diplomatic and strategic dialogues, the economic relationship has produced comparatively greater benefits for Russia than for Pakistan. Despite the potential, the annual trade has remained low under \$75 million compared to their markets in comparison to Russia’s trade with India and China, which is worth billions of dollars every year. In 2001, Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Losyukov, visited Pakistan and emphasized the importance of enhancing economic cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity. During this period, the Russian Federation expressed interest in investing in key energy initiatives including the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) project and the North-South Gas Pipeline, both of which held potential benefits for Russia as well. However, these commitments largely remained unrealized, with little concrete implementations on the ground. Despite continued dialogue and a series of agreements between Pakistan and Russia, practical progress has been limited, especially when compared to Russia’s more robust economic and energy partnership with India.

In comparison, Russia’s relationship with India varies significantly, if compared to Pakistan. India has an increasingly growing trade relationship with Russia, consisting of energy imports, whereas Pakistan’s trade with Russia is much smaller in the energy and agricultural sectors. Pakistan-Russia trade comprises only 0.5% of the global trade, which is significantly less than that of India. See the following figure:



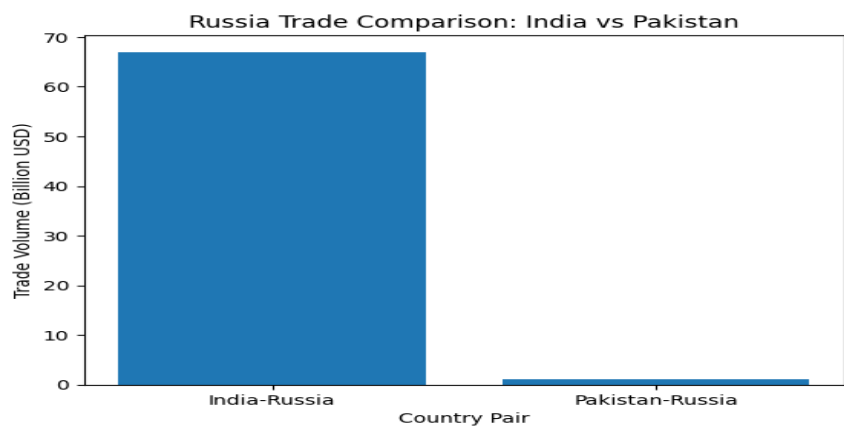
Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Pak-Russia Trade Composition,” accessed March 28, 2026, <https://oec.world/en>

However, the year 2014 was a turning point in the Pak-Russia relationship when the West condemned Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and implemented Western sanctions along with Russia’s expulsion from the G8. This led to a sharp decline in oil prices and a decrease in Europe’s trade relations, which was Moscow’s largest trade partner. This compelled Russia to look for new security and economic partners in Asia. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Russian Federation Central Bank and the State Bank of Pakistan on bilateral banking cooperation, which resulted in an increase of bilateral trade from US\$442 million in 2017 to US\$532 million in 2018. The bilateral trade has further increased to \$1 billion in the year 2023, which stands as a marginal portion in comparison to the bilateral trade between Moscow and New Delhi. On the contrary, India-Russia bilateral trade relations have hit an all-time high record in the year 2023-2024 of \$65.70 billion, and both countries are aiming to hit the target of \$100 billion by 2030.



Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Pak-Russia Trade Composition,” accessed March 28, 2026, <https://oec.world/en>

Therefore, India’s utility for Russia as one of the top trading partners is much higher than that of Pakistan. Bilateral trade volume between both countries has surpassed \$70 billion, with Russia enjoying a trade surplus of almost \$67 billion vis-à-vis India. In comparison to this, the bilateral trade volume between Russia and Pakistan hardly touches the \$1 billion mark. Thus, Russia’s economic engagement with India is beneficial for the former, which provides Moscow with impetus to build strong strategic and economic partnerships with New Delhi. See the graph below for comparison:



Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Pak-Russia Trade Composition,” accessed March 28, 2026, <https://oec.world/en>

Russia is also known to be the ‘energy superpower’ as it is one of the world’s leading natural gas and oil exporters. Moscow, being a country relying immensely on hydrocarbon revenues, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted Russia’s economy due to a sharp decline in global energy demand and prices, thus contributing to the weakening of the ruble. In its efforts to expand markets for natural gas and petroleum exports, Russia has found Pakistan as a potential energy partner. Pakistan faces a significant energy deficit, with a gas shortfall of approximately 1.5 billion cubic feet per day, projected to increase by 2028, and it is currently among the world’s largest importers of LNG. At the same time, Russia aims to diversify its export destinations by expanding its LNG production capacity and increasing exports by 2035, making Pakistan an attractive prospective client.

This convergence of interest was reflected in mid-2023, when Pakistan received its first shipment of discounted Russian crude oil and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) with a commitment to import more, compared to logistical and financial arrangements. However, despite multiple agreements and expressions of intent in the energy sector, practical implementation has remained limited. Projects such as Pakistan’s Stream Gas Pipeline have seen tangible progress. Moreover, cooperation between Russia’s Gazprom and Pakistan’s OGDCL on offshore gas exploration, as well as plans to assist in reviving Pakistan Steel Mills, remain largely at the exploratory or discussion stage.

In comparison to this, the Russian energy partnership with India is much more substantial and operationalized. Russian oil constitutes a significant share of India’s crude oil imports, making Russia its largest supplier, along with the supply of coal, fertilizers, and natural gas in large quantities.

Moreover, India has invested around \$16 billion in Russia's energy sector in projects like Sakhalin-1. The two nations are also interested in collaborating on the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant and plan to develop more nuclear power units. To stay vigilant from the Western sanctions, both states utilize a rupee-ruble payment mechanism compared to Pakistan, which signed a barter trade agreement in October 2024, further exploring direct banking channels to accommodate sanctions risks and reduce reliance on US dollars. In short, where Pakistan and Russia's bilateral relations are more exploratory and focused on agreements and commitments focusing on long-term projects and development with smaller trade volumes, India and Russia are known to be major and interdependent energy and economic partners.

Conclusion

India is known to be a 'legacy' partner of Russia in all aspects - including defence and security, economic cooperation, energy, and political partnership. The signing of the 'Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership' in October 2000, followed by its elevation to a 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership' in 2010, institutionalized and deepened the bilateral cooperation in all domains, reflecting mutual trust and recognition of each state's geopolitical importance. In comparison, despite consistent high-level political engagement to strengthen bilateral relations, Pakistan and Russia have been unable to elevate their relationship to a comparable level of strategic depth. While historically limited, the Pakistan-Russia relationship has gradually improved, driven by converging interests in regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism, and the SCO framework. Nevertheless, India remains a constraining factor in the evolution of the Pakistan-Russia relationship, not just because of the historical legacy of Indo-Russian strong partnership but because India's utility for Russia far outweighs that of Pakistan. When Russia and Pakistan see utility in pursuing their national interests, they become natural partners. This trend shows selective cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, even when the Indian factor is held constant.

References

- Ahmed, Adeel, and Zeeshan Memon. "Pakistan and Russia: Economic and Trade Relations." *The Asian Bulletin of Green Management and Circular Economy* 4, no. 2 (2024): 4-2.
- Ali, Usman, and Tauseef Javed. "Pakistan-Russia Emerging Cooperation: Opportunities and Challenges." *Margalla Papers* 28, no. 1 (2024): 141-160.
<https://cssplatformbytha.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PAKISTAN-RUSSIA-EMERGING-COOPERTION-OPPORTUNITIES-AND-CHALLENGES.pdf>
- Chia, Claudia, and Zheng Haiqi. "Russia-Pakistan economic relations: Energy partnership and the China factor." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 4, no. 4

- (2021): 20-36. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/russia-pakistan-economic-relations-energy-partnership-and-the-china-factor/>
- Chughtai, Alia 'What are India and Pakistan military capabilities', 2025. Aljazeera.<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/8/what-are-india-and-pakistans-military-and-nuclear-capabilities>
- Han, Xiaochuang, Eunsol Choi, and Chenhao Tan. "No permanent friends or enemies: Tracking relationships between nations from news." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1904.08950* (2019).
- Khan, Hafeez Ullah. "Pakistan-Russia relations and the changing paradigm." *J. Pol. Stud.* 26 (2019): 231.
- Khan, Muhammad. "The Evolving Nature of Pakistan-Russia Strategic Relationship." *Strategic Thought* 7, no. 1 (2025): 19-34. <https://strategictthought.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/116/96>
- Khan, Muhammad Taimur Fahad. "Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Russia." *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3 (2019): 89-104. <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/6-SS-Muhammad-Taimur-Fahad-Khan-No-3-2019.pdf>
- Klyszcz, Ivan U. "Russia and the Taliban takeover." *research paper, Foundation pour la Recherche Strategique* 17 (2021): 2021. <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2021/172021-02.pdf>
- Murad, Muhammad, Muhammad Ramzan Kolachi, and Uroosa Ishfaq. "Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership: The case of India and Pakistan." *Global Political Review* 3, no. 2 (2018): 31-39.
- Naeem, Shabana, and Shabnam Kausar. "Kashmir Issue During Musharraf Era: A Diplomatic Shift Towards Peace." *Social Science Review Archives* 3, no. 2 (2025): 383-394. <https://policyjournalofms.com/index.php/6/article/view/624/653>
- Qazi, Afsah, Muhammad Shoaib, and Muhammad Faisal. "Russia-Ukraine War and the indo-pacific: A perspective from Pakistan." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 1 (2025): 617-634. [Russia-Ukraine war Pakistan perspective .pdf](#)
- Ullah, Najeeb, and Muhammad Abbas Brohi. "International north-south transport corridor: Challenges and opportunities for Pakistan." *Stratagem* 1, no. 1 (2018): 100-113.
- Xinhua News Agency. "Pakistan Jets Destroy Air Defense System in India's Punjab." May 10, 2025. Edited by Huaxia. <https://english.news.cn/20250510/8db95ed002b84d229272289fca5b789b/c.htm>