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From Cautious Engagement to Assertive Diversification: Strategic Autonomy in Pakistan's Russia Policy, 2013–2022

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's Russia policy between 2013 and 2022 witnessed a gradual shift from cautious engagement to assertive diversification. Historically, Pakistan remained closer to the United States and China, while Russia maintained a long-standing strategic partnership with India, which limited the scope of Pakistan-Russia relations for decades. This article examines how Pakistan's post-2013 outreach toward Russia should be understood not merely as an improvement in bilateral relations, but as part of Islamabad's broader search for strategic autonomy through foreign-policy diversification. Using a qualitative case-study approach and process tracing, the study analyzes official statements, policy documents, agreements, diplomatic developments, UN voting behavior, credible reports, and scholarly literature. Theoretically, the article draws on the concepts of strategic autonomy, hedging, and diversification to explain how states expand diplomatic space without fully abandoning existing alignments. It argues that Pakistan moved closer to Russia due to converging security concerns in Afghanistan, counterterrorism cooperation, energy needs, regional connectivity ambitions, strained ties with the United States, and intensifying great-power competition. However, the findings show that this policy did not amount to a full strategic realignment because it remained constrained by Russia's enduring defence relationship with India, Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities, and the limited institutional depth of bilateral cooperation.

Introduction

In fact, regional insecurity, asymmetrical dependence and the need for external support, have been central themes in Pakistan's foreign policy. In the Cold War era, Pakistan was pro-American and the USSR was pro-Indian with a robust political, military and strategic relationship (Ghosh, 2024). This alignment pattern led to a deep mistrust between Pakistan and Russia and kept bilateral relations at a minimum for decades. In this backdrop, Pakistan's increasing involvement with Russia between 2013 and 2022 is noteworthy. This change was not a sudden change in policy from the traditional Pakistan-China or Pakistan-West relations. Instead, it was an attempt to expand external options and room for diplomatic manoeuvre in an evolving regional and international context (Noor-E-Hera, 2024).

The years 2013-2022 were of special significance as they saw a number of developments that put Pakistan-Russia ties on a more practical trajectory. These involved defence cooperation, counterterrorism engagements, energy talks, coordination on Afghanistan, Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Pakistan's diplomatic balancing in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. These developments suggest that Pakistan's Russia policy shifted from symbolism to a more aggressive diversification policy. The concept of strategic autonomy is used in this article to understand the Pakistan's Russia policy during the time. It is not the same with Pakistan where strategic autonomy equates with independence from the big powers or neutrality in world affairs. Instead, it is a strategy for Pakistan to safeguard decision-making autonomy, to minimize over-dependence on any one external player, and to involve several powers simultaneously.

Background of the Study

Pakistan and Russia took over a relationship of mistrust, ideology and different types of alliances. During the Cold War period, Pakistan's relation with the Western block and the Soviet Union's association with India did not allow for a proper bilateral cooperation for long (Zaidi & Saud, 2021). Russia's presence in Afghanistan exacerbated the tension and Pakistan was transformed into a front line country against Soviet presence. Pakistan-Russia relations started improving slowly after the breakup of the USSR. The post-9/11 context offered opportunities for pragmatic interaction, especially in the areas of Afghanistan, terrorism, and regional stability (Singh, 2016). But the normalization process was a gradual and measured process, as Russia was still highly aware of the strategic value of its relationship with India, and Pakistan was still very close with the United States and China.

The relationship has started to move at a more purposeful pace since 2013. Interactions with diplomats grew in number, military ties became more apparent and Russia opened up to Pakistan in a broader sense than India. Defence cooperation agreement of 2014 and the military drills were a crucial improvement in bilateral relations (Qazi & Bashir, 2022). The relationship also gained an expanded economic aspect, particularly in the sphere of energy cooperation, including consideration of gas pipelines and energy infrastructure. This process of Pakistan's engagement with Russia should be framed in the broader context of the changing dynamics in the region. Opportunities in Afghanistan's withdrawal, Pakistan's status as a difficult state with US; rise of China, re-emergence of Russia in the Asian arena and new emerging platforms in the region provided room for Pakistan to diversify its foreign policy.

Research Questions

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How did Pakistan's Russia policy evolve from cautious engagement to assertive diversification between 2013 and 2022?
2. What political, security, economic, and regional factors encouraged Pakistan to expand engagement with Russia?
3. To what extent did Pakistan's Russia policy reflect strategic autonomy rather than complete strategic realignment?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this article are:

1. To examine the evolution of Pakistan's Russia policy from 2013 to 2022.

2. To identify the major domestic, regional, and international drivers behind Pakistan's engagement with Russia.
3. To analyze Pakistan's Russia policy through the concepts of strategic autonomy and foreign-policy diversification.

Conceptual Framework: Strategic Autonomy and Foreign-Policy Diversification

The strategic autonomy is the capacity of a country to maintain decision making autonomy and to not become excessively dependent on any single major power. It does not necessarily imply neutrality, isolation or distance from all competing powers. Instead, it's about the ability to handle several relationships so as to safeguard national interests and preserve foreign-policy flexibility (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024). It is a concept very suitable for grasping the foreign policies of in-dependency and insecurity states. These may face constraints in their ability to operate autonomously in all scenarios, but they can still attempt to broaden their diplomatic options by bringing multiple players on board. From this perspective, what matters is that strategic autonomy is not complete independence, but the capacity to not become bound into one inflexible alignment.

Foreign-policy diversification closely ties in with the concept of strategic autonomy. A states' attempt to increase relations with various major powers, regional organizations and economic partners simultaneously. Diversification helps a state to minimize their susceptibility, stay diplomatic in nature, and have better bargaining power in foreign relations (Noor-E-Hera, 2024). Hedging is also a part of the explanation of Pakistan's Russia policy. Hedging is a flexible approach whereby states do not fully align with a single power but do have working relations with multiple states competing with each other. This is particularly prevalent in times of instability or unpredictability, when states may lack clarity on the future trajectory of global or regional politics (Seitkozha & Raev, 2025).

For Pakistan, strategic autonomy must be seen as a limited but concerted attempt to open up diplomatic avenue. Pakistan did not want to cut ties with China, defy entirely from US and establish an alliance with Russia. Rather, it tried to incorporate Russia into its foreign policy portfolio as a means to bolster its role in the security, energy, and great-power game of the region. Russia was brought into this strategy for a number of reasons. It provided opportunities for cooperation in defence, co-ordinating counterterrorism, Afghanistan-related activities, energy infrastructure and broader connectivity within Eurasia. The Pakistan policy of Russia was therefore a diversification policy and not a drastic change of course.

Literature Review

Cold War Legacy and Historical Mistrust

The Cold War era is considered as the starting point of the Pakistan-Russia relations in the literature. Pakistan's cooperation with the USA in designing its security arrangements and being allied with the western powers brought suspicion into Moscow, whereas the close cooperation of Soviet Union with India brought suspicions about Soviet intentions in Pakistan (Zaidi & Saud, 2021). The triangular dynamics between Pakistan-Russia-Uzbekistan formed the basis of Pakistan's long relations with Russia for decades. It is also suggested that Pakistan and Russia saw each other primarily through the prism of third party relations. Moscow was Pakistan's friend in India and Islamabad was Russia's friend in America. This established a relationship which, while it might have the potential for cooperation, remained structurally constrained.

Post-Cold War Normalization

Following the disintegration of Soviet Union, Pakistan and Russia gradually started normalizing relations. Ideological tension was dampened by the end of bipolar rivalry and opportunities for limited diplomatic engagement emerged due to shifting regional dynamics. The post-9/11 era was pivotal as both terrorism and Afghanistan and regional instability raised concerns in parallel (Rabbi et al., 2021). But it wasn't a 'true partnership' that was created instantly through normalization. Russia stayed India's primary South Asian partner and Pakistan remained more dependent on the United States and China. Pakistan-Russia relations consequently took a positive turn gradually but were not without caution and selectivity.

Defence and Security Cooperation

With respect to literature, one of the largest proportion covers the area of defence and security cooperation. The 2014 defence cooperation agreement has been generally interpreted as a watershed moment as it facilitated the strengthening of military-to-military interactions between Pakistan and Russia (Qazi & Bashir, 2022). This was significant, as defence interaction had been one of the least successful of Pakistan-Russia relations in the past. Joint military exercises further strengthened practical cooperation. The Druzhba military exercises marked a new degree of trust, and helped institutionalize counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries (Khan, 2021). The developments indicated that Pakistan-Russia relations have shifted from the symbolic diplomatic approach to a more pragmatic security engagement. There is also a link between the Pakistan-Russia relationship and Afghanistan and Central Asia in the security literature. States had concerns of terrorism, instability and the potential for militant networks to spread across the region. This interrelatedness lent a more strategic basis to the relationship.

Energy and Economic Engagement

One other topic which is important in the literature is energy cooperation. Energy crisis in Pakistan was a reason for looking for Russian investment and technical assistance as well as cooperation in the infrastructure sector. One of the most visible signs of energy cooperation between the two countries was the North-South Gas Pipeline, also mentioned later as Pakistan Stream, which became known as such in 2023 (Strokan). Economic engagement also connected Pakistan-Russia relations with wider Eurasian connectivity. Its geographical position created opportunities for links between South Asia, Central Asia and the wider Eurasia region for Pakistan. Under the new Russia, Pakistan also had a chance to secure China's support by establishing itself as an "useful regional actor" (Javaid, 2025). Given these opportunities, however, scholars have noted that economic cooperation was still not at its potential. There was limited trade, energy projects were delayed and institutionalization was weak to make the relationship a strong economic partnership.

Gap in Existing Literature

Some literature offers valuable insights on historical mistrust, defence cooperation, Afghanistan related convergence, energy diplomacy and the India factor. Most studies however address these issues independently. Less has been written about Pakistan's Russia policy between 2013 and 2022, which embodies a strategic journey of autonomy and assertive diversification. This article aims to fill this void, by synthesising these developments within one analytical framework. It believes that Pakistan's foreign policy with Russia during this time was not mere bilateral enhancement, but a broader push for the expansion of Pakistan's diplomatic options in the context of regional insecurity and global power competition.

Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative approach of CQRS and process tracing methodology to analyze the developments of Pakistan's Russia policy from 2013 to 2022. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the article tries to explain a shift in foreign policy, not measure it statistically. The case study approach enables analysis of Pakistan's Russia policy in a well-defined time frame. Process tracing is used to trace the trajectory toward assertive Russia policy from cautious engagement to diversification in Pakistan. This looks into diplomatic ties, defence cooperation, energy negotiations, coordination on Afghanistan, SCO engagement and Pakistan's response to important international developments including Ukraine crisis.

The study is based on official statements, diplomatic communiqués, agreements, speeches, UN voting behavior, policy reports, credible news reporting and scholarly literature. The strategy used in this case is document based because Pakistan-Russia relations have developed in the context of formal agreements, visits of top officials, defence contacts, multilateral platforms and public diplomatic roles (Rasool & Zaheer, 2024). The study is not a strictly causal study. It does not say that this single factor brought about the change in policy in Pakistan regarding Russia. It looks, however, at the interaction of various factors that collectively influenced Pakistan's attitude to Moscow. Pakistan's concerns regarding security, energy, Afghanistan policy, U.S. ties, ties with China and the evolving role of Russia in South Asia are all relevant.

The article is limited to a discussion on Pakistan's Russia policy in the span of 2013 – 2022. It does not discuss the entire history of the South Asian policy of Russia, nor does it regard Pakistan-Russia relations as an overall alliance. It aims to examine the roles and extent to which Pakistan's foreign policy with Russia helped the state cultivate strategic autonomy and why.

Historical Background: Pakistan-Russia Relations before 2013

Prior to 2013, Pakistan-Russia relations were marred by historical distrust and strategic distance. In the days of Cold War, Pakistan was aligned with the western countries, while the Soviet Union had strong ties with India. This situation formed a triangular relationship between Pakistan, Russia and the rest of the world, where Pakistan and Russia seldom had the opportunity to build independent bilateral trust (Khan, 2019). The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan further soured relations. Western and regional support was given to the Afghan resistance by Pakistan, while the Soviet Union saw Pakistan as a big impediment in its Afghan policy. This time brought increased enmity and increased negative perceptions along with it.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the relationship gradually got better. The ideological gap vanished, and both states started to consider 'limited engagement'. But progress was still slow as Russia kept its attention on India and Pakistan relied heavily on the United States and China for security and economic assistance. The situation in the region and globally had started to shift in the early 2010s. In Afghanistan the U.S. was readying to pull out, China's presence in Pakistan was growing and Russia was seeking greater involvement in Asia. The situation opened up an opportunity for Pakistan and Russia to reassess their shallow relationship.

Phase One: Cautious Engagement, 2013–2015

The overall stance of the Pakistan's Russia policy during the examined period might be termed as "cautious engagement". Islamabad started trying to make inroads into cooperation with Moscow during 2013-2015, but the ties remained cautious, selective, and restricted. Pakistan wanted to broaden its diplomatic horizons, but did not wish to show the shift in its policy towards Russia as a significant strategic pivot. Defence cooperation, energy cooperation and diplomatic dialogue were the main areas of interaction. The most significant development that took place in 2014 was the defence cooperation agreement that indicated Russia's willingness to work with Pakistan in an area that has traditionally been sensitive (Qazi & Bashir, 2022). This pact was not an alliance but it ushered in further security cooperation.

Another important area that was discussed was energy. The energy crisis in Pakistan made the Russian partnership appealing particularly in the field of gas pipelines and gas infrastructure. Pakistan's energy crisis found an opening in the Russian collaboration, particularly in gas pipeline and gas infrastructure projects. These debates were indicative of Pakistan's desire to diversify its economic relations and to lessen its reliance on a few selected external partners. Regardless of all these developments Pakistan's posture was still conservative. Russia's strategic alliance with India was a significant constraint. Pakistan was also very close with China and maintained its relations with the United States. So 2013-2015 was not a time of realignment, it was a time of testing possibilities.

Phase Two: Security Convergence and Institutional Engagement, 2016–2018

In the second phase, that is from 2016–2018, security convergence and institutional engagement increased. This was the time when Pakistan-Russia relationship stepped out of the realm of diplomatic symbolism and became more practical in the security arena. Cooperation expanded to include counterterrorism issues as well as Afghanistan and regional stability. This was substantially aided by joint military exercises. Institutionalized military contact and a willingness to overcome Cold War mistrust makes the Druzhba exercises of 2016 significant. The Druzhba exercises of 2016 were significant because they institutionalized military contact and indicated a willingness to overcome Cold War mistrust (Khan, 2021). The exercises demonstrated both countries' willingness to cooperate in counterterrorism and security training efforts.

Afghanistan was also to be a big hub of convergence. In both countries, the fear of instability, terrorism and the potential threat of extremist networks emanating from Afghanistan to the region was of concern. These common concerns added a real security sense to the relationship. The inclusion of Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) further enhanced institutional linkages. Through SCO, Pakistan created a regional forum in which it could engage with the member countries of Russia, China, and the Central Asian countries in a well-structured forum (Yaqoob & Qureshi, 2025). This enabled Pakistan to sell itself as a component of a larger framework of security and connectivity in Eurasia. In this period, Pakistan's Russia policy evolved into a more

confident but still constrained one. Islamabad was not breaking from its traditional partnerships. Instead, it was adding Russia to its wider diplomatic and security network.

Phase Three: Assertive Diversification, 2019–2022

The third phase (2019–22) can be termed as assertive diversification. During this time, Pakistan became more visible and politically active with Russia. Energy requirements, the post-US exit Afghanistan, Pakistan's geo-economic aspirations, and growing great power competition all contributed to shaping the relationship. Pakistan has sought to focus more on geo-economics, connectivity and multi faceted partnerships. Russia became relevant to this approach as a source of possibilities in energy, connectivity and regional security. The interest of Pakistan in the Russian energy cooperation was rooted in the economic necessity and diversification of the Pakistani foreign policy.

The engagement of Afghanistan continued to be at the core of Pakistan and Russia. Since the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan in 2021, regional countries are growing more worried about terrorism, instability, refugees and the future of Afghan governance. While Pakistan and Russia had concerns about Afghanistan security issues, they did not have the same concerns (Khan & Khan, 2022). During the Ukraine crisis in 2022, it is to test Pakistan's strategic autonomy. In 2022, the Ukraine crisis put to the test Pakistan's efforts of maintaining strategic autonomy. Pakistan's foreign policy stance was an attempt to steer clear of a pro-West or pro-Russia stance. In this role, Pakistan has shown its commitment to maintaining flexibility in foreign policy in a critical period of the world. By 2022, the Pakistan-Russia partnership has definitely come out of the fence. But it was not yet an anti-Western turn or a formal strategic “alignment” with Moscow. It was more clearly recognized as constructive diversification within structural boundaries..

Drivers of Pakistan’s Russia Policy

Several factors explain why Pakistan expanded engagement with Russia between 2013 and 2022.

Security Driver

One of the top motivators was security. Pakistan considered Russia a helpful partner in counterterrorism efforts, coordination in Afghanistan and stability in the region. Military exercises and defence dialogue were two developments that demonstrated that security cooperation had become a reality in the relationship (Saud & Abbasi, 2024).

Energy Driver

The issue of energy shortage pushed Pakistan to involve Russia. The energy crunch generated strong incentives to involve Russia. Russia was a potentially valuable partner for its skills in gas, oil and energy infrastructure. Energy cooperation further aided in bringing foreign policy closer to the domestic economic needs of the country.

Geo-economic Driver

There was a growing emphasis on geo-economics, connectivity and trade in Pakistan's foreign-policy discourse. Due to Russia's Eurasian vision and Pakistan's position it realized there was potential for cooperation between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia (Javaid, 2025).

Great-Power Competition Driver

The escalation of great power competition also spurred Pakistan to diversify its foreign policy. Pakistan did not wish to rely on either bloc or the bigger partner. This time around, Islamabad's linkage with Russia provided it with greater diplomatic maneuverability in a more competitive international environment.

India Factor

The Indian influence was a determinant factor as well as a limiting factor. It was a fact that Pakistan knew that Russia's defence relationship with India was not easily replaceable and could not be weakened. Islamabad, however, still believed in establishing a partial linkage with Moscow to mitigate isolation in the diplomatic arena and provide further strategic space (Roy, 2023).

Constraints and Limitations of Pakistan-Russia Cooperation

Though the Pakistan-Russia relations have improved considerably, they remained confined. Russia had an established strategic and defence ties with India, that was the key constraint. Russia's vision of India as a leading regional partner restricted the extent of its approach to Pakistan (Ghosh, 2024). The economic fragilities also limited Pakistan's strategic independence. Pakistan's reliance on foreign funding, domestic financial uncertainty, and restricted trading potential hampered its efforts to build substantial economic ties with Russia alongside its diplomatic progress with the country.

One other challenge was the slow pace of energy projects. Energy cooperation was the subject of repeated talks, but it was difficult to get going because of financing, bureaucratic, sanctions and fluctuating political priorities. The Ukraine crisis added to the complications. Pakistan tried to play an equilibrating role but the crisis put pressure on the states dealing with Russia. This posed further problems for Pakistan's diversification policy, particularly as Pakistan also had significant economic and diplomatic ties with the western countries. Thirdly, Pakistan-Russia ties didn't have the institutionalization of the Pakistan-China ties. Relationships strengthened in areas of defence contacts, diplomatic exchanges and energy talks, but did not become a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Discussion: Strategic Autonomy or Strategic Realignment?

The Russia policy of Pakistan from 2013 to 2022 must be seen as a policy of strategic autonomy through diversification and not a complete shift in strategy. Pakistan did not sever ties with China, did not completely turn its back on the U.S. and had no formal treaty with Russia. Instead, it attempted to widen its diplomatic and strategic options. A strategic realignment would mean a big move from one strategic camp to another. That is not the case with the behavior of Pakistan. The available evidence clearly indicates that Islamabad was not seeking to discontinue its existing relationships with other countries, but rather to complement them with Russia policy.

The theory of strategic autonomy is thus more apt. In a shifting international context Pakistan sought to ensure space for decision making. Outreach to Russia was a component of its strategy for avoiding excessive dependence, engaging in multiple powers, and remaining flexible to regional challenges. But Pakistan's strategic autonomy was limited. The economic and domestic fragility of Pakistan, the cooperation between Russia and India and a great power contestation restricted Islamabad's freedom of action. So Pakistan's Russia policy was not a policy of autonomy, but was constrained autonomy.

Findings

Firstly, the Pakistan's policy towards Russia changed in a gradual manner from cautious engagement to assertive diversification between 2013 and 2022. Second, the transition was spurred by a number of factors – from a security perspective, from an energy perspective, from an instability related to Afghanistan, from a regional connectivity perspective, and from a great power politics perspective. Thirdly, Pakistan's relationship with Russia was not a complete strategic shift. An effort to broaden the diplomatic options without losing the relations. Fourthly, confidence was fostered through defence cooperation and military exercises, which were not enough to turn the relationship into a formal alliance. Fifthly, energy cooperation provided Pakistan-Russia ties with economic relevance, though its implementation was sluggish and weak. Sixth, bilateral ties failed to turn strategic due to Russia's partnership with India and Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities and the shallowness of the institutional dimension of cooperation.

Conclusion

The Pakistan's Russia policy in the past eight years (2013-2022) shows an important change in Pakistan's foreign-policy behavior. The dynamic shifted from being cautious to assertive in the relationship, indicating Pakistan's quest for strategic autonomy amidst

the evolving regional and global landscape. It was a pragmatic change, not a doctrinal. Pakistan requested Russian help in the field of defence, counterterrorism, Afghanistan, energy and connectivity in the region. Meanwhile, it sought to maintain relationships with China, to handle its relations with the West and to not be completely dependent upon any one external partner.

But Pakistan's Russia connectivity was limited due to structural limitations. Russia's long history of close ties with India, Pakistan's precarious economic situation, the slow movement of energy projects, and the Ukraine crisis all limited the extent of cooperation. As a result, it is not correct to suggest that Pakistan's Russia policy in 2013-2022 was essentially a strategic realignment. It is more commonly understood as a form of "strategic straitjacket. Pakistan tried to broaden its foreign-policy choices but within the constraints that geography, economics, regional rivalry and great-power rivalry placed on it.

The Pakistani example demonstrates that strategic independence for a small nation such as Pakistan does not imply independence from larger powers. But it is also about opening up outside options, handling conflicting ties, and building diplomatic margins in an inescapable structure.

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