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Less-Than-Great Expectations: The Pakistani-Russian Rapprochement

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In the two years since Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf visited Russia in February 2003, relations between Islamabad and Moscow have become friendlier than ever before. Even so, important differences continue to divide the two nations and will limit how far their rapprochement can go.

Previous attempts at improved ties between Moscow and Islamabad have foundered for three reasons. The most significant is Russia's close relationship with Pakistan's arch-rival, India, which Moscow has never been willing to risk for the sake of improved relations with Islamabad. In addition, Pakistan and Russia have been rivals for influence in Afghanistan. And Pakistan has offended the Russians by providing refuge for Chechen and other rebels from the former Soviet Union. Close Pakistani-American relations, of course, have not served to improve ties between Moscow and Islamabad, but strained relations between the United States and Pakistan have not usually resulted in improved Russian-Pakistani relations either.

PAST DIVISIONS

During the cold war, the interaction between global Soviet-American rivalry and the regional Indian-Pakistani hostility led the United States to ally with Pakistan and the Soviet Union with India. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased Pakistan's fear of Moscow and motivated Islamabad to support the Afghan mujahideen fighting the Soviet occupation. When the cold war ended, however, Indian-Pakistani hostility did not. Moreover, the post-cold-war emergence of India and China as the most important customers for the cash-strapped Russian arms industry did not endear Moscow to

Islamabad. Another source of tension occurred following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, with the subsequent rise of the Pakistan-backed Taliban movement in most of Afghanistan. Moscow feared the Taliban would try to spread its brand of Islamic radicalism into former Soviet Central Asia as well as Chechnya and other Muslim regions of Russia. In a reversal of roles, Moscow threw its support behind the Afghan Northern Alliance, which opposed the Taliban, even though some of the Northern Alliance's members had previously fought against Soviet forces.

Russian-Pakistani relations were thus already tense when General Musharraf came to power in a coup in October 1999, a short time after Vladimir Putin had become Russia's prime minister. The relationship deteriorated even further in the months that followed. In November 1999, the Russian government indirectly accused Pakistan of being one of a dozen countries “suspected of exporting terrorism to Russia.” Russian experts on Pakistan concluded that “extremist groups, as well as the notorious Osama bin Laden, are behind General Musharraf.”

Chechnya proved to be an especially sticky issue. Moscow's brutal military interventions to prevent the mostly Muslim republic from seceding from the Russian Federation have offended Muslims worldwide. After distancing Pakistan from the Chechen rebels the previous two years, the Pakistani government under Musharraf condemned Russia's renewed intervention in Chechnya in 1999. The Pakistani press and Islamic political parties followed suit. In January 2000, the Russian Foreign Ministry criticized Pakistan for supporting the Taliban government's recognition of Chechnya as an independent state. Moscow was especially enraged when the Chechen ambassador to Afghanistan, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, traveled to Islamabad.

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There he delivered a speech, raised funds for the Chechen cause, and claimed to meet Musharraf and other top Pakistani leaders (though Islamabad denied this). Musharraf, for his part, sharply criticized the Putin administration's announcement that Russia would bomb Afghan camps at which it suspected Chechen rebels were being trained.

In early September 2000 relations seemed poised to improve when Putin and Musharraf met briefly at the United Nations. Later that month, Putin sent a special representative—Sergei Yastrzhembsky—to Islamabad to ask Musharraf and other Pakistani leaders to help Moscow establish contact with the Taliban. Yastrzhembsky's visit reportedly did not go well, however. The relationship soured further when Putin made a speech in New Delhi supporting India's position in its dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir. Russian and Indian officials also signed a "strategic partnership" declaration and a package of military-technical agreements.

Islamabad has long called on arms suppliers to maintain a balance in sales between Pakistan and its stronger neighbor, India. As it has done for decades, Moscow ignored this plea and continued to sign arms deals with New Delhi. In December 2000 it was announced that Hindustan Aeronautics had acquired the rights to produce Russian SU-30MKI fighters in India. In February 2001, India signed another agreement to purchase T-90S tanks from Russia. A few months later, in June, Moscow and New Delhi agreed to jointly develop a "multifunctional" military transport plane, the IL-214. As the arms sales multiplied, the Russo-Pakistani contest in Afghanistan continued, with Russia (along with Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) supporting the opponents of the Pakistan-backed Taliban. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov even claimed that "Pakistani soldiers were fighting alongside the Taliban in the months before September 2001."

The American-led intervention that ousted the Taliban government in the months after 9-11 dramatically affected the Russian-Pakistani competition in Afghanistan. Pakistan dropped its support for the Taliban and aided American military operations. Islamabad and Moscow appeared to be on the same side as the United States when it came to Afghanistan. But it soon became clear that Pakistan wanted Pashtuns (the Afghan ethnic group that most of the Taliban came from) to dominate the new Afghan government while Russia wanted non-Pashtuns—especially Moscow's Tajik allies—to hold power. Although initially displeased that the Americans favored Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, to

become interim president of Afghanistan, Moscow soon established relatively good relations with him when it became clear that Karzai was willing to cooperate with Russia. (Karzai's relations with Islamabad, on the other hand, became strained over the ability of the deposed Taliban to operate from Pakistani territory.) In February 2002, the interim Afghan defense minister, Muhammad Fahim, a Tajik, reached an agreement with his Russian counterpart for Russia to supply spare parts for the Tajik-dominated Afghan army's Russian weaponry.

That same month also saw Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov offend Islamabad by strongly endorsing the Indian position on the Kashmir dispute. Moscow, in turn, was displeased when the leaders of Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan signed an agreement in early 2002 to build a pipeline to carry Turkmen natural gas through Afghanistan to Pakistan, thus threatening to deprive Russia of the transit revenues from the existing export route for Turkmen natural gas that runs through Russian territory.

TOWARD RAPPROCHEMENT

Despite the differences between the two countries, Russian-Pakistani relations began to show signs of improvement in 2002. After 9-11, both had become America's somewhat reluctant allies in the war on terrorism. In addition, Musharraf appeared to hope that friendlier ties with Russia would induce Moscow to be less pro-Indian and more "evenhanded," if not pro-Pakistani. Putin seemed to hope that better relations with both New Delhi and Islamabad could help reduce Indian-Pakistani tensions—and increase Russia's stature in the process. In March, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed appreciation for Pakistan's "active role" in combating terrorism in Afghanistan. At an Asian security conference held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in June, Putin held separate talks with Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to foster reconciliation between India and Pakistan. (Putin may have hoped to repeat the 1966 Soviet mediation effort between India and Pakistan which reduced tensions between the two South Asian neighbors after their 1965 war and which briefly resulted in closer Soviet ties with Pakistan as well as India.) In November, Russia's energy giant Gazprom and Pakistan's Oil and Natural Resources Ministry discussed joint ventures. The next month a Russian-Pakistani working group on counterterrorism held its first meeting in Moscow.

Russian-Pakistani relations grew considerably warmer when Musharraf visited Moscow in Febru-

ary 2003. This marked the first official visit by a top Pakistani leader to the Russian capital since Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's trip in March 1972. During this visit, the two governments signed agreements calling for cooperation between their interior ministries "in fighting organized transnational crime and illicit drug trafficking." The two governments also agreed to negotiate accords under which Moscow would enlarge a Soviet-built steel mill in Pakistan and restructure Pakistan's debt to Russia. Musharraf called on Russia to help improve Indo-Pakistani relations and peacefully resolve the conflict over Kashmir. Putin noted that Russian-Pakistani relations had improved "since Pakistan joined the international antiterrorist coalition." Musharraf said he would like to move past the misunderstandings that had plagued relations between the two countries. The two leaders also expressed their joint opposition to "unilateral" intervention in Iraq without UN Security Council approval.

The new, friendlier tone to relations continued when Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov visited Pakistan in June 2003 (the first such visit by a Russian foreign minister in a decade). Ivanov praised Pakistan's efforts to "neutralize extremists" based within the country. Putin and Musharraf met again in October when both leaders attended the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit meeting in Malaysia. This marked another first: a Russian leader had never attended an OIC gathering before. In December, the two governments signed an agreement to cooperate "in the fight against financial violations, abuses and corruption."

Last year saw a continuing flurry of agreements, including a draft treaty on extradition and the exchange of information on terrorists and an agreement to sell Russian KI-26 helicopters to Pakistan. After the Beslan tragedy in September 2004, in which Chechen militants took over a school in the Russian republic of North Ossetia and more than 300 people were killed, Musharraf telephoned Putin to offer condolences. Islamabad then pledged to provide Moscow with intelligence on any Chechen militants that had been arrested in Pakistan. Gazprom CEO Alexsei Miller met with the Pakistani ambassador to Russia to discuss Gazprom's participation in oil and gas projects in Pakistan as well as in plans to build a pipeline to transport natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and India.

LIMITS TO FRIENDSHIP

Despite its tense beginning, the relationship between Putin and Musharraf has improved dramatically. Important differences remain, however, between Russia and Pakistan. Islamabad has hoped that improved ties with Moscow would lead to a more active Russian role in resolving the Indian-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir. As one Pakistani newspaper put it shortly before the February 2003 Putin-Musharraf summit, "Russia will use its influence to resolve the Kashmir dispute." But Russian leaders, in part deferring to India's opposition to mediation, have mainly indicated a willingness to play the more modest role of helping to facilitate dialogue between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The Putin administration is not willing to risk disrupting Russian-Indian relations by adopting a stance more sympathetic to Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Indeed, on the day Musharraf arrived in Moscow to

meet Putin in February 2003, Putin phoned Vajpayee to assure him that Russian-Indian relations would not be harmed by the visit.

Similarly, the improvement in Russian-Pakistani relations has not resulted in the purchase of major weapons systems from Moscow, as Musharraf had apparently hoped for. Although Moscow sold a few weapons to Pakistan in 1968 at the height of the cold war, post-Soviet Russia under Putin has been highly reluctant to do so. Moscow claimed that the KI-26 helicopters it had agreed to sell Pakistan were for civilian transport and not for military purposes. And Moscow has denied rumors of a sale of Russian tanks to Islamabad. Shortly before a December 2004 visit by President Putin to New Delhi, Russian Defense Minister Ivanov also denied a report that Russia would supply the engines for fighter aircraft being jointly built by China and Pakistan for the Pakistani Air Force. Meanwhile, large-scale Russian arms sales to India have continued apace.

In contrast, Moscow does not appear at all concerned about Pakistan's unhappiness over the large quantity of weapons Russia sells to India. As *Izvestia* reported in January 2004, "India accounts for nearly 60 percent of Russia's exports of weapons and military equipment. It has more than \$3.5 billion in contractual commitments, and the Indians are looking over some 350 preliminary contracts." Given that Moscow is eager to find foreign buyers for Russian weapon systems, its reluctance to sell

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them to Pakistan appears to be the result of an unwillingness to upset India.

BEHIND THE WARMING

What is remarkable about the Russian-Pakistani rapprochement is that it has occurred not because Moscow and Islamabad have overcome their differences, but despite the fact that they have not. There have, of course, been other cases of rapprochement between countries that continued to have serious differences. The Soviet-American détente of the 1970s is the most famous example of this. Détente evolved not because Washington and Moscow had resolved their differences, but out of a desire to regulate them in order to prevent nuclear war. Soviet-American relations had grown increasingly strained by the time détente came to an abrupt end when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

Like the United States and the Soviet Union during the cold war, both Russia and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons. Neither Moscow nor Islamabad, however, appears to be worried that nuclear war might occur between them. To the extent that they do worry about the nuclear issue, each seems more

concerned about the other not being in sufficient control over its nuclear know-how or materials to prevent unauthorized proliferation to third countries. In early 2004, Russian officials strongly criticized Pakistan in the wake of the A. Q. Khan scandal for its role in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. (Khan, the “father” of the Pakistani atomic bomb, sold nuclear know-how to other countries at odds with the United States—ostensibly without the knowledge of the Pakistani government, though many doubt this.)

For Pakistan, frustration regarding its relations with the United States appears an important motive for seeking rapprochement with Russia. An improved relationship with Russia is seen as a means of reducing Pakistan’s dependence on America. One of Pakistan’s largest circulating newspapers, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, succinctly captured this argument shortly before Musharraf’s February 2003 visit to Moscow: “Whenever US interests change their direction, we are categorized as a suspect country and our strategic assets termed unsafe. And if we protest, we are accused of not cooperating in the anti-terrorism campaign. This is happening because

we have been acting on their [US] dictates without any hesitation. And now, we are finding it difficult to maintain our independent status in the changed international scenario. So why should we not make our foreign policy more realistic when our difficulties are not coming to an end?” Islamabad senses that New Delhi has profited from maintaining good relations with both Russia and America, and believes that it would too.

For its part, Moscow has three main motives for pursuing rapprochement with Pakistan. First, this is a component of Putin’s campaign to enhance Russia’s relations with and image in the Muslim world. Moscow’s effort to improve relations with Pakistan has occurred alongside its efforts to improve ties with Saudi Arabia and to obtain at least observer status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Underlying this diplomatic initiative is a desire to cement relations with Muslim governments so that they will not support, or even express sympathy for, Chechen and other Muslim opposition groups in

Russia and the former Soviet republics.

Second, Russia hopes that friendlier relations with Islamabad may lead to the termination of at least some of the radical Muslim elements

operating in Pakistan that Russian leaders are concerned about. While Moscow is unhappy that Taliban remnants as well as Chechen and Central Asian radical Islamists have obtained refuge in Pakistan—as well as some degree of protection and support from elements within the Pakistani government—it has apparently decided that engagement with Islamabad is more productive than confrontation. In fact, the Russians appear to be getting some cooperation from the Musharraf government on this matter—unlike previously, when Russian-Pakistani relations were far more negative. And, of course, relations could grow worse—and the radical elements more dangerous—if Musharraf were replaced by a militant Islamic regime. Russia as well as many other countries, including the United States, regards the Musharraf government as preferable to this possibility.

Finally, with American and other coalition forces present in Afghanistan, the Pakistani-Russian competition over that country has subsided, though not ended. While Russian press commentary indicates that Moscow continues to prefer the Tajiks of the Northern Alliance (whom it sees as forming the

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backbone of the new Afghan army) over the Pashuns, it also indicates that Moscow does not expect American forces either to prevail in Afghanistan or to remain there indefinitely. What this suggests is that Moscow anticipates the Russian-Pakistani competition for influence in Afghanistan will resume if US forces leave, and that Moscow is prepared to back the Afghan Tajiks in the struggle that is likely to reemerge.

INDIA IN THE BACKGROUND

If these were the only motives pushing Russia and Pakistan to pursue rapprochement, it is doubtful that the process could go much further than it has or could even avoid collapse. Moscow has made it clear that it is not going to push India to reach a settlement on Kashmir that is more acceptable to Pakistan. Moscow is not even willing to make large arms sales to Pakistan out of concern that doing so might curtail its lucrative arms-sale relationship with New Delhi.

There is, however, one other factor that not only has contributed to the emergence of the Moscow-Islamabad rapprochement, but also could lead to its further development to include major Russian arms sales to Pakistan at some point in the future. This is the possibility that Russia might lose its position as India's principal foreign ally and arms supplier. Numerous Russian press reports indicate fears in Moscow that this possibility may one day become reality.

Since the 1990s, Indian-American relations have improved dramatically as the two have developed closer economic ties as well as similar security concerns. Both Moscow and Islamabad view this development with alarm—Pakistan's concerns having more to do with security, Russia's with economics. During the cold war, Pakistan had looked to the United States for some measure of protection against its larger neighbor. The closer Indian-American relations become, the more Islamabad fears losing this protection. As for Russia, because its armed forces cannot afford to buy much from Russian weapons manufacturers, India's large-scale arms purchases from and co-development and co-production of advanced weapons systems with Russia are seen as crucial to the Russian defense industry's ability to keep pace with its Western counterparts. Moscow views the possibility that India might redirect its arms purchases away from Russia and toward the United States or elsewhere as a threat not just to export earnings but also to the arms industry's abil-

ity to produce modern weapons. Moscow's complaints about India's negotiating aggressively about the price it pays for Russian weapons systems indicate that New Delhi does not see itself as dependent on Moscow alone for arms. Indeed, Russian observers have noted that India is already diversifying its arms purchases away from Russia. Moscow has expressed annoyance that India buys spare parts and upgrades for Russian weapons from third parties—including countries that also sell defense equipment to Pakistan.

Moscow fears that as India becomes stronger and richer, Russia will be less able than other countries (or even India itself) to fulfill New Delhi's desire for advanced weapons systems. An *Izvestia* commentator has noted that, as New Delhi "outgrows" the traditional ties of decades past, India is finding its old 'children's games' with old friends [that is, Russia] less and less attractive, nostalgia and romanticism notwithstanding." Moscow's rapprochement with Islamabad may thus be intended as a warning to New Delhi: if India ends or significantly cuts back on arms purchases from Russia, Moscow can readily sell weapons to Pakistan. Islamabad's obvious desire to buy Russian weapons, despite being rebuffed so far, helps to reinforce this message.

Yet, despite Russian fears about India's turning elsewhere, New Delhi continues to co-develop weapons as well as buy them from Moscow. Several new agreements were signed or reportedly close to completion at the time of Putin's December 2004 visit to New Delhi. Even if India further diversifies its arms supply sources, its continued willingness to sign billions of dollars worth of arms agreements with Russian firms provides Moscow with a strong incentive not to risk losing New Delhi's business by selling weapons to Islamabad (which, of course, could not afford to buy nearly as much from Russia as New Delhi does).

The expansion of Pakistani-Russian ties to include a significant arms relationship appears to depend on a deterioration in the Russian-Indian relationship that Moscow will not initiate and desperately wants to avoid. Despite its low probability, Islamabad may hope a decline in Russian-Indian relations will occur, and Pakistan would quickly act to take advantage of the situation if it does. If Moscow ever does "lose" New Delhi, it will regard a closer relationship with Pakistan not as a substitute for India but more as a consolation prize. Similarly, if Islamabad "loses" the United States to India, closer ties with Russia will hardly make up for the loss. ■