

# Institutions, Sovereignty And Strategic Calculations; Integrating Liberal And Realist Theories In Understanding Pakistan-Russia Dynamics

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## Abstract

*Drawing upon influential works by Elaine Landry & Dean Rickles (2012), Shuja Nawaz (2017) and Donaldson & Vidya Nadkarni (2023), among others, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolving relationship between Pakistan and Russia, integrating insights from strategic neoliberalism, structural realism and real constructivism. As socio-economic elements in both countries have coerced their governments to trace mutual pursuit of national interests within the framework of international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), this study reflects a delicate balance between asserting sovereignty and engaging in strategic cooperation to address shared security concerns and economic interests. Thus, by synthesizing defined liberal and realist models, this study addresses three central questions; (1) How does the integration between defined theoretical framework enhance our understanding of Pakistan-Russia dynamics? (2) To what extent do historical legacies and cultural perceptions shape strategic calculations in both states? (3) What role do international institutions play in shaping the course of Pakistan-Russia relations? Employing a qualitative methodology including content analysis and stakeholder interviews, this study contributes to scholarly discourse by offering a deep perspective on the complexities of Pakistan-Russia dynamics through the barter trade agreement between both states through currency swap mechanism on February 24, 2022, and tussle between Pakistani government and state institution(s) regarding designing state narrative on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.*

## Introduction

In the complex landscape of international relations, understanding the dynamics between states necessitates the application of diverse theoretical frameworks. The understanding between the strategic neoliberalism, structural realism and real constructivism, exploring their relevance in deciphering the evolving relationship between Pakistan and Russia. By synthesizing insights from these theoretical perspectives, this paper provides a deep analysis of the multilayered interactions between the two countries, elucidating how historical legacies, cultural perceptions and institutional frameworks shape their strategic calculations.

Strategic neoliberalism, championed by scholars like Keohane (1984) and Strange (1996), underscores the importance of economic interdependence and institutional collaboration in molding state behavior (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 150). In the context of Pakistan-Russia relations, economic interests have emerged as a primary driver of their engagement. For instance, the

barter trade agreement between Pakistan and Russia, facilitated by a currency swap mechanism on February 24, 2022, illustrates how economic considerations have spurred strategic cooperation beyond traditional security concerns (Gul, 2022). Structural realism, on the other hand, as expounded by Patrick James (2002) and Elaine Landry & Dean Rickles (2012), posits that states are primarily motivated by the anarchic structure of the international system and the pursuit of power and security (Landry & Rickles, 2012, p. 02). In the case of Pakistan and Russia, their strategic calculations are heavily influenced by geopolitical considerations and regional power dynamics. The increasing convergence of interests within regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>2</sup> (EAEU) underscores their strategic calculus in directing shared security concerns, such as counterterrorism efforts for regional stability<sup>3</sup> (Krasnopsky, 2022, p. 22).

At the same time, Real constructivism, as articulated by Katzenstein (1996) and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2014), highlights the role of social constructions, norms and identities in shaping state behavior (Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 53). Within the Pakistan-Russia context, historical legacies and cultural perceptions play a significant role in shaping their interactions. For example, Pakistan's historical alignment with the United States during the Cold War era and Russia's legacy as the successor state to the Soviet Union have influenced perceptions of trust and suspicion between the two countries, impacting their strategic calculations<sup>4</sup> (Vaughan-Williams, 2014, p. 54).

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<sup>2</sup> Although, Pakistan is not a member of EAEU but according to Dr. Ahmed Ahmedov, "former prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan had been intended to install pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan with the help of China, Iran and Russia just for seeking Central and South Asian Economic Corridor under either SCO or EAEU".

<sup>3</sup> Through the platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Pakistan and Russia have played vital roles in endorsing regional stability and combating terrorism, as demonstrated by their participation in the joint anti-terrorist exercise "Manesar-Anti-Terror-2022". This exercise, conducted under the auspices of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the SCO, showcased the effective cooperation and joint capabilities of member states in countering specific terrorist threats. According to Zekhom Arinov, "the involvement of Pakistan and Russia in such initiatives highlights their commitment to enhancing security cooperation within the SCO framework. Additionally, their active participation underscores the importance of multilateral efforts in addressing shared security challenges and maintaining peace in the region. Furthermore, by extending invitations to observer states and other regional security organizations such as the CIS ATC and the CSTO, the exercise reflects the SCO's inclusive approach to promoting regional security through collaborative counter-terrorism measures" (Arinov, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The historical path of Pakistan-Russia relations has been characterized by periods of mistrust and alignment with rival powers, notably the United States for Pakistan and India for Russia. However, in recent years, both countries have exhibited a notable shift towards a more amicable and cooperative relationship. Russia's transition from an anti-Pakistan stance to a pro-Pakistan posture can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the changing geopolitical landscape, marked by Russia's strained relations with the West, particularly following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent sanctions, prompted Moscow to diversify its international partnerships. Pakistan emerged as a strategic partner offering opportunities for economic cooperation, particularly in the energy sector with projects like the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline. Additionally, Russia's growing disillusionment with India's pivot towards the United States and its expanding defense ties with Washington created space for closer engagement with Pakistan (Stolyar, 2023).

Conversely, Pakistan's shift from an anti-Russia stance to a pro-Russia orientation can be understood within the context of Islamabad's evolving foreign policy imperatives. The gradual thawing of tensions between Pakistan and Russia can be traced back to the post-Cold War era, with both countries

Against this backdrop, this study employs qualitative methodology encompassing content analysis and stakeholder interviews, seeks to address a) how the strategic neoliberalist, structural realist and real constructivist frameworks define Pakistan-Russia dynamics, b) how historical legacies and cultural perceptions between both states strategically calculate their current position for each other, and c) how international institutions such as SCO and EAEU play their role in strengthen Pakistan-Russia relations? As the study utilizes qualitative methodology with encompassing content analysis and stakeholder interviews, first there is a need of explaining how defined theoretical framework facilitates the research questions in tracing the answers.

### **Theoretical Integration: Understanding Institutions in Pakistan-Russia Relations**

The integration of strategic neoliberalism, structural realism and real constructivism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of Pakistan-Russia relations, particularly in the context of institutions shaping their strategic interactions. This integration draws upon insights from diverse theoretical perspectives to explicate the role of key institutions in both countries (including the foreign office, defense ministry, energy ministry and army) in reshaping their relations, advancing their affairs related to sovereignty and strategic interests in the region.

#### **Strategic Neoliberalism**

Strategic neoliberalism emphasizes the significance of economic interdependence and institutional cooperation in international relations. According to Peter Rutland (2013), institutions facilitate cooperation among states by reducing transaction costs and providing mechanisms for resolving conflicts (Rutland, 2013). In the case of Pakistan and Russia, economic considerations have increasingly become intertwined with their strategic calculus. For example, the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline project, initiated in 2022, underscores the role of economic cooperation in strengthening bilateral ties despite geopolitical challenges. Similarly, Russia's investments in Pakistan's energy sector demonstrate the mutual benefits of economic collaboration. Moreover, institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provide a platform for strengthening economic and security cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, enhancing their sovereignty by enabling them to pursue shared interests within a multilateral framework (Rutland, 2013).

#### **Structural Realism**

Structural realism theorizes that states are primarily driven by the anarchic structure of the international system and the pursuit of power and security. Naqvi & Abbas (2022) argue that states seek to maximize their relative power to ensure their survival in a competitive environment (Naqvi & Abbas, 2022). In the context of Pakistan-Russia relations, structural factors such as regional power dynamics and external pressures shape the strategic calculations of both countries. For instance, Pakistan's historical alignment with the United States during the Cold War and Russia's defense ties with India have influenced their perceptions of security threats and alliances. However, changing geopolitical dynamics, including Russia's strained

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reassessing their strategic alignments in light of changing global dynamics. Pakistan's increasing reliance on China as a key ally and its desire to balance against Indian hegemony in the region have driven Islamabad towards seeking closer ties with Russia. Furthermore, Russia's willingness to engage with Pakistan on issues of mutual interest, such as counterterrorism and regional stability, has provided impetus for enhancing bilateral cooperation. This shift is exemplified by Pakistan's efforts to strengthen economic and defense ties with Russia, as evidenced by Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Moscow in February 2022, despite the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Stolyar, 2023).

relations with the West and Pakistan's pivot towards China, have created opportunities for redefining their strategic interests and alliances. Moreover, institutions such as the defense ministries play a critical role in shaping military cooperation and security strategies between Pakistan and Russia, contributing to their efforts to assert sovereignty and address shared security concerns<sup>5</sup> (Naqvi & Abbas, 2022).

### **Real Constructivism**

Real constructivism exhibits the role of social identities and/or public standards in shaping state behavior. According to Ahmed and Khizar (2021), states' interactions and cooperation are heavily influenced by their perceptions of themselves and others. In the context of Pakistan and Russia, historical legacies and cultural perceptions have played a significant role in shaping their strategic calculations and foreign policy decisions. For instance, Pakistan's historical alignment with the United States and Russia's status as the successor state to the Soviet Union have molded their perceptions of one another. However, evolving norms and identities, such as Pakistan's desire for regional integration and Russia's reassertion of influence in Eurasia, have led to a reassessment of their relations<sup>6</sup>. Institutions such as the foreign offices play a vital role in shaping diplomatic engagements and public narratives, influencing perceptions of bilateral relations and regional dynamics. Additionally, cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts boosted by institutions such as cultural ministries contribute to building trust and understanding between Pakistan and Russia, paving the way for enhanced cooperation and sovereignty (Ahmed & Khizar, 2021).

Hence, this integrated approach enables a deep exploration of how economic, geopolitical and socio-cultural factors shape bilateral interactions between Pakistan and Russia. However, further understanding needs a comprehensive literature review that would facilitate this study to interrogate research questions more comprehensively.

### **Literature Review and Gaps**

The literature on Pakistan-Russia relations offers valuable insights into the complexities and dynamics of their interactions, sketching from historical analyses, geopolitical assessments and policy evaluations. Scholars such as Anatol Lieven (2012) Bobo Lo (2015) and Hafeez Malik (2016) have provided comprehensive accounts of the historical route of Pakistan-Russia relations, highlighting the shifts in geopolitical dynamics and the developing nature of their engagement. However, there remains a gap in understanding how the integration of defined theoretical frameworks, including strategic neoliberalism, structural realism and real

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the critical role that institutions like defense and foreign ministries play in shaping military cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, the Pakistan army has historically acted as a proxy for the United States in the region. This was evident in its support for restoring US regional influence, particularly following Pakistan's alignment with Iran, China and Russia in establishing a friendly government in Afghanistan in August 2021, which led to the ousting of the pro-US government and US forces from the region (Naqvi & Abbas, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Pakistan's engagement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) represents a strategic move towards regional economic integration and cooperation. Stemming from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the EAEU embodies Russia's response to evolving global dynamics and aims to enhance economic ties among member states. Unlike Pakistan Army, Pakistan's political government's interest in EAEU initiatives reflects its recognition of shifting regional norms and aspirations for broader economic cooperation beyond traditional alliances. Through alignment with the EAEU and collaboration with institutions like the EDB, Pakistan's political government, during 2018 to 2022, searched to enhance mutual trust, promote stability and advance its economic interests in the Eurasian region (Khan, 2023).

constructivism, can enhance understanding of Pakistan-Russia dynamics within the context of Pakistan-Russia Barter Trade Agreement 2022 and Russia-Ukraine Conflict (Mehmood, 2023).

On the other hand, the historical path of relations between Pakistan and Russia has undergone significant shifts, marked by periods of mistrust and alignment with rival powers, as well as recent efforts towards cooperation and partnership. This narrative is well-documented in the literature, with scholars highlighting key events and geopolitical factors that have shaped bilateral interactions. For instance, Smith (2018) provides insights into the historical context of Pakistan-Russia relations, emphasizing the impact of Cold War dynamics and regional power struggles on the alignment of both countries with superpower patrons. Despite the abundance of historical analyses, a notable gap in the literature lies in the exploration of how historical legacies and cultural perceptions continue to influence contemporary strategic calculations between Pakistan and Russia. While some studies – Daniel S. Markey (2013) and Zahid Hussain (2021) – touch upon historical factors, such as Pakistan's alignment with the United States and Russia's relations with India, there remains a need for deeper examination of how these legacies intersect with evolving geopolitical realities to shape present-day interactions.

Likewise, when this study looks at economic and military cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, it traces some significant aspects of their evolving relationship, reflecting shifting geopolitical dynamics and strategic imperatives. Scholars like Khan (2019) and Shuja Nawaz (2020) have examined the varied shades of defense ties between the two countries, including arms trade and joint military exercises, within the framework of strategic realism. Similarly, analyses of economic collaboration, such as energy projects and trade agreements, shed light on the pragmatic considerations driving bilateral engagement. However, their works fall short in integrating diverse theoretical perspectives to comprehensively understand the motivations behind economic and military cooperation. While realist theories highlight the strategic calculations driving arms deals and security partnerships, a deep understanding of how neoliberal principles influence economic collaboration, or how constructivist dynamics shape perceptions of security and cooperation, remains underexplored (Nawaz, 2020, pp. 49-52).

At the same time, multilateral engagements, particularly through institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), have provided avenues for Pakistan and Russia to pursue shared objectives and address regional challenges. Scholars such as Rozman & Radchenko (2017) have analyzed the role of institutions in shaping security cooperation among SCO member states, including Pakistan and Russia, from a realist perspective. Similarly, studies by Glenn Diesen (2017) have examined the economic dimensions of EAEU integration and its implications for regional dynamics. Though, despite insights into multilateral engagements, a literature gap exists in examine institution(s) role specifically within the context of Pakistan that do not allow any political government to follow national interests but only the US or Western interests in the region (Diesen, 2017, pp. 11-14).

During examining the barter trade agreement between Pakistan and Russia, facilitated by a currency swap mechanism in February 2022, this study traces significant development in Pakistan-Russia bilateral relations, reflecting evolving economic and strategic calculations. Additionally, the tussle between the Pakistani government and state institution(s) regarding designing the state narrative on the Russia-Ukraine conflict underscores the complexities of foreign policy formulation and internal dynamics within Pakistan. This literature review explores the gap in Pakistan's policy making process in a way that this assignment should lead by the either democratically elected public representatives or armed forces (Donaldson & Vidya Nadkarni, 2023).

### **Institutions Role and Strategic Calculations between Pakistan and Russia: 1947-2023**

During the early phases of Soviet-Pakistani engagement, the influence of institutional structures was evident, particularly in the context of ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism. The attempted communist revolution in British India during the 1920s, spurred by Soviet-backed elements, underscored the ideological dimension of Soviet-Pakistani relations. However, this ideological alignment faced significant challenges, particularly during the Cold War, as Pakistan sought closer ties with the Western bloc, thereby complicating institutional cooperation between the two states (Kamran, 2023).

Structural realism offers insights into the strategic calculations that shaped Pakistan-Russia relations during pivotal junctures, such as the Indo-Pakistani conflicts and the Afghan-Soviet War. The strategic calculus of both states was influenced by regional power dynamics, security concerns and alliances with external actors. For Pakistan, the perceived threat from India and the quest for security drove strategic decisions, including military cooperation with the United States. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's strategic interests in South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan, shaped its policies towards Pakistan, oscillating between cooperation and containment (Kamran, 2023).

As Real constructivism exhibits state behavior and interactions, despite historical animosities and strategic divergences, instances of cooperation and rapprochement between Pakistan and Russia underscore the potential for normative shifts and identity reconstructions. The thaw in relations following the Soviet Union's collapse and the emergence of new geopolitical realities provided opportunities for both states to reassess their positions and engage in pragmatic cooperation, reflecting the influence of evolving norms and identities (Kamran, 2023). As per Khadeja Kermani and Syed Naser Talqani (2023), "the post-Cold War era witnessed a recalibration of Pakistan-Russia relations, characterized by efforts to overcome historical distrust and forge closer ties based on shared interests and mutual benefit. Post-9/11 public-oriented institutional mechanisms, such as high-level diplomatic exchanges, bilateral agreements and joint initiatives, played a crucial role in facilitating this rapprochement. They further led economic cooperation, energy partnerships, and military collaboration as key areas of convergence, driven by strategic imperatives and pragmatic considerations" (Kermani & Talqani, 2023).

At the same time, Zammurd Afshan (2024) defines that "the deepening of institutional linkages, including strategic dialogues on counter terrorism and regional stability, joint military exercises and economic forums, reflects a growing recognition of the strategic significance of bilateral ties and the imperative of institutionalized cooperation" (Afshan, 2024).

Looking ahead, till April 2022, the role of institutions in Pakistan-Russia relations was likely to remain pivotal, serving as conduits for directing complex geopolitical challenges, enhancing mutual understanding and advancing shared interests. Till that time, strategic neoliberalism emphasized the role of institutional cooperation in promoting economic integration, investment and trade, offering opportunities for mutual prosperity and development through the platform of either SCO or EAEU. Similarly, structural realism underscored the importance of institutions in managing security dilemmas, mitigating conflicts and preserving stability in volatile regions. Likewise, real constructivism highlighted the potential of institutions in promoting trust and facilitating cooperation based on mutual respect and recognition (Kamran, 2023).

In February 2022, a significant development unfolded between Pakistan and Russia when Imran Khan visited Moscow. However, as his airplane landed in Moscow, the Russia-Ukraine war commenced. Despite expectations from pro-Western entities that Imran Khan would abandon this visit, he neither withdrew nor condemned the war, instead announcing Pakistan's neutrality. This event highlighted a clear divergence in vision between the political government and the Pakistan army. While Imran Khan refrained from taking a stance, the Pakistan army

chief openly condemned Russia's actions against Ukraine. Furthermore, during Imran Khan's visit, the Pakistan-Russia barter trade agreement with a currency swap mechanism was ratified by the cabinet on February 24, 2022. This agreement signaled a departure from the US dollar, potentially denting the political economy of the dollar. Subsequently, the US embassy in Pakistan, with the assistance of Pakistan army generals, initiated a regime change operation. According to former British ambassador Craig Murray, the CIA spearheaded this regime change operation in Pakistan, aided by elements within the Pakistan army. The motive behind this operation stemmed from Pakistan's sovereign foreign policy, which resisted allowing US forces to station in Pakistan as they withdrew from Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistan's reluctance to criticize Russia over the Ukraine war and its efforts to initiate de-dollarization with Russia, Afghanistan and Iran through barter trade agreements were perceived as threats to US interests (Murray, 2023).

Hence, the ousting of Imran Khan from the government sent a clear signal to Russia that the institutional framework in Pakistan still adhered to US policies rather than prioritizing national interests or public sentiments.

### **Russia's Growing Interest in Closer Ties with Pakistan**

Despite hardness between both countries since April 2022, 2023 was celebrated as 75<sup>th</sup> year of inaugurating diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Russia. At this time, when Islamabad and Moscow have claimed to embark on a new chapter of cooperation, the recent visit of Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to Russia in January 2023, along with various interactions and meetings on multilateral forums, has injected fresh momentum into bilateral relations. Both Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Minister Bhutto-Zardari expressed their desire to enhance cooperation across diverse fields in video messages commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties (Chatwin, 2024).

From Musharraf's visit to Moscow on 2004 to Imran Khan's visit on 23-24 February 2022, Pakistan and Russia have intensified their diplomatic relations, marked by regular high-level contacts. Key milestones include President Asif Ali Zardari's visit to Russia in 2011 and Moscow's support for Islamabad's application to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). An important stride was taken in 2014 when Pakistan and Russia initiated joint defense cooperation, encompassing military intelligence exchange, joint military drills and the sale of military hardware. Pakistan's procurement of Russian military equipment, including MI-35 attack helicopters and its interest in acquiring advanced systems like the Su-35 fighter jet, underscore the deepening defense ties between the two nations. Furthermore, joint military exercises like "Druzhba" (friendship) since 2017 have focused on counter-terrorism operations, enhancing bilateral security cooperation (Chatwin, 2024).

However, a significant break between both countries since the ousting of Imran Khan from government somewhat normalized when June 2023 exhibited a significant development as Pakistan received its first shipment of Russian crude oil, amounting to 45,000 tons out of a planned 100,000 tons. Notably, this transaction was conducted in Chinese currency, signifying a departure from traditional dollar transactions. However, this shipment was first and the last, received by the Pakistan government in public pressure regarding restoring de-dollarize ties between both countries ratified by the Imran Khan government. Later on, Pakistan did not turn towards cheap Russian oil by favoring US policies in the region. Otherwise, till April 2022. bilateral trade volume surged by 34%, reached \$760.5 million, indicated a positive path in economic ties (Chatwin, 2024).

This time, Russia is still keening to add Pakistan in EAEU and want to inaugurate Central and South Asia Economic Corridor announced by the Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in

2021. However, ambiguities within foreign policy of Pakistan regarding determining exact location of national interests exhibit various hurdles not only for Pakistan's national economic growth but other countries including Russia which recognize geostrategic worth of Pakistan (Chatwin, 2024).

### **Strengthening Pakistan-Russia Relations through SCO**

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as a multilateral platform, has notably influenced the dynamics of Pakistan-Russia relations, enhancing cooperation in several sectors. Since its inception, the SCO has acted as a conduit for strengthening diplomatic, economic and security ties between its member states, including Pakistan and Russia. As the SCO summits and meetings allow leaders and diplomats from both countries to engage directly and discuss issues of mutual interest, it assists both countries to enhance a better understanding and reducing historical mistrusts emerged during the Cold War. One of the significant aspects of the SCO's influence on Pakistan-Russia relations, as this study explores, has been in the realm of security and defense. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO has been pivotal in promoting cooperation in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime. Both Pakistan and Russia have shared concerns about the stability of the region, particularly regarding Afghanistan. Joint exercises and information sharing under the SCO's framework, such as the anti-terror exercises, have helped both countries align their strategies against common threats (UNSC-CTC, 2015).

Furthermore, the economic dimension of the SCO also provided new avenues for Pakistan and Russia to enhance their bilateral trade and investment ties. Energy is a significant sector where the SCO's influence was evident. Russia, with its vast reserves of natural gas and oil, is ready to become an important partner for Pakistan, which faces energy shortages. The discussions within the SCO framework are facilitating agreements on energy exploration and potential pipeline projects, like the North-South gas pipeline project, which envisaged transporting natural gas from Karachi to Lahore (Bhutta, 2023).

During the 2019 Bishkek summit, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's proposal to de-dollarize trade among SCO member countries and establish an SCO bank represented a strategic move towards enhancing economic sovereignty and regional integration<sup>7</sup>. This initiative aimed to reduce reliance on the US dollar, which dominates global trade and financial markets, thereby minimizing the Western influence on the economic policies of SCO members. For Pakistan and Russia, both of which have faced various economic sanctions and financial restrictions from Western nations, such a shift could facilitate more direct trade and financial transactions, mitigating risks associated with currency fluctuations and external economic pressures (Putz, 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> According to Dr. Ali Taimur Sardar, "the establishment of an SCO bank, a pivotal element of this proposal, would potentially allow for streamlined financial transactions, easier access to credit, and the promotion of joint projects within the region without the constraints imposed by Western financial systems. For Pakistan, this could mean enhanced access to Russian markets, technology and capital, especially in critical sectors like energy and defense. Similarly, Russia could benefit from increased opportunities in Pakistani markets and further cooperation in infrastructure and industrial projects" (Sardar, 2023).

"Moreover, trading in local currencies could bolster Pakistan's and Russia's economies by stabilizing trade balances, lowering transaction costs and boosting a more predictable business environment. This arrangement would likely encourage small and medium-sized enterprises in both countries to explore new markets and establish cooperative ventures without the daunting barriers posed by dollar-dominated trade mechanisms" (Sardar, 2023).



At the same time, when SCO promotes cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts among its members, it is also helping improvement in the general perception between the peoples of Pakistan and Russia since 2017. Such interactions have laid the groundwork for enhancing mutual understanding and softening historical biases. During Imran Khan's tenure as Prime Minister, Pakistan-Russia relations saw a marked improvement, guided partly by the multilateral engagements within the SCO. Imran Khan's foreign policy was characterized by a more balanced approach, seeking to enhance relations with major powers, including Russia. His participation in SCO summits and bilateral meetings with Russian officials on the sidelines of these events underscored a commitment to deepen ties in various domains, notably in trade and defense (Arinov, 2023).

Despite the positive route during the Imran Khan regime, the relations faced new challenges post-April 2022, as Pakistan began to re-align more closely with the United States. This shift caused some strains in Pakistan-Russia relations, reflecting the broader geopolitical realignments. The complexities of international diplomacy meant that while the SCO had facilitated closer ties, it could not entirely insulate the bilateral relationship from the impacts of global geopolitical shifts (Arinov, 2023).

### **Pakistan-Russia Relations under Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)**

On August 21, 2018, Pakistan's pursuit of membership or a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) extracted from several strategic economic and geopolitical considerations. The EAEU, under the leadership of Russia, represents a substantial collective market and an opportunity for Pakistan to diversify its trade partnerships and reduce its economic dependency on traditional Western markets, particularly in light of fluctuating relations with the United States. This shift aligns with Pakistan's broader economic strategies, including the diversification of its trade and investment sources, as emphasized during 2017 to April 2022. This study tries to trace the reasons how and why Pakistan moved towards EAEU, a regional organization under Russian patronage;

#### **1) Economic Diversification and Access to New Markets**

Pakistan's interest in the EAEU is driven by the need to explore new economic opportunities beyond its traditional markets in the West. The decline in exports during the tenure of the previous government under the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) exacerbated the urgency to find alternative markets to sustain and grow Pakistan's export-driven economy. The EAEU offers access to the markets of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, which could provide new consumers for Pakistani textiles and other major export items. By engaging with the EAEU, Pakistan hopes to mitigate the adverse effects of any economic sanctions or trade barriers that could arise from its complex relations with Western countries, especially considering the geopolitical shifts and the potential threats of US sanctions over its deepening ties with China through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Khawaja, 2024).

#### **2) Strengthening Pakistan-Russia Relations**

Engaging with the EAEU is also a strategic move to strengthen bilateral relations between Pakistan and Russia. During Imran Khan's regime, Pakistan sought to deepen ties with Russia as part of its broader foreign policy realignment towards Eurasia, recognizing the growing influence of Russia in the regional and global arena. A formal trade relationship with the EAEU, led by Russia, would not only enhance economic ties but also pave the way for increased political and security cooperation. This relationship is particularly significant given the historical Cold War-era alignment of Pakistan with the United States, which has seen fluctuations in the post-Cold War

period. Improved relations with Russia through economic partnerships could lead to more balanced foreign relations and open doors for collaboration in areas like energy, defense and technology transfer, which are critical for Pakistan's development agenda (Khawaja, 2024).

### 3) Geopolitical Realignments and Enhanced Regional Influence

The strategic engagement with the EAEU aligns with Pakistan's interest in enhancing its geopolitical influence in the region. By promoting closer economic ties with a Russia-led bloc, Pakistan could potentially leverage these relationships to enhance its regional stature and influence, especially relative to India, with whom it has longstanding tensions. This move could also be seen as part of a broader strategy to create a counterbalance to increasing Indian-American ties, particularly after the U.S.-India civil nuclear agreement. Furthermore, the EAEU membership could provide Pakistan with an opportunity to play a more significant role in regional integration initiatives, contributing to stability and economic growth in Central Asia, a region that is not only geographically proximate but also strategically important for Pakistan (Khawaja, 2024).

Throughout Imran Khan's tenure, the push towards Eurasian integration through potential membership in the EAEU highlighted Pakistan's attempt to direct its complex regional and global diplomatic relations, diversify its economic dependencies, and enhance its strategic autonomy by aligning more closely with Russia and other Eurasian states.

### The Paradox of Pakistan's Institutional Dynamics in Shaping Foreign Policy

The complex relationship between Pakistan's various institutions, particularly the government ministries and the military, in determining the country's foreign policy orientation towards Russia presents a complex narrative. While governmental bodies actively seek to strengthen Pakistan-Russia ties through multilayered mechanisms such as diplomatic engagements, defense deals and cultural exchanges, a significant faction within the Pakistan Army, alongside certain bureaucrats, remains inclined towards maintaining pro-US policies. This inclination often manifests in obstructing public representatives from forging closer relations with Russia, thereby working against the sentiments and aspirations of the Pakistani populace and elected government officials. Despite the clear economic benefits and strategic advantages that enhanced cooperation with Russia could offer, this faction within the military and bureaucracy continues to prioritize alignment with US interests, seemingly disregarding the broader national interests of Pakistan (Asim, 2024).

According to Turab Durrani (2024), "the persistence of pro-US policies within certain segments of Pakistan's military and bureaucracy, despite the evolving global geopolitical landscape and the imperative for diversification away from unilateral US dominance, raises critical questions regarding the country's sovereignty and institutional coherence. At a time when global alliances are shifting and multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are actively working towards de-dollarization and regional stability, Pakistan's adherence to US-centric policies (evidently projecting after April 2022) underscores a glaring institutional flaw rooted in colonial legacies. The historical echoes of British colonial practices, which entrenched a hierarchical power structure favoring Western interests, seem to persist within certain echelons of Pakistan's military establishment, perpetuating a disconnect between national interests and institutional priorities. This dichotomy is exacerbated by the military's historical involvement in supporting US-led initiatives, such as the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, which inadvertently contributed to the proliferation of terrorist groups in the region, undermining Pakistan's own security and stability" (Durrani, 2024).

In the face of these institutional challenges and contradictions, Pakistan grapples with the fundamental question of its sovereignty and autonomy in shaping its foreign policy route. The enduring influence of Western interests, perpetuated by certain factions within the military and bureaucracy, poses a formidable obstacle to the realization of Pakistan's full sovereignty and agency on the global stage. To truly assert its independence and safeguard its national interests, Pakistan must address the entrenched institutional dynamics that prioritize external alignments over domestic imperatives. This necessitates a concerted effort to recalibrate institutional priorities, foster greater civil-military dialogue and consensus-building, and forge a coherent foreign policy framework that reflects the aspirations and interests of the Pakistani people. Only through such transformative reforms can Pakistan transcend the vestiges of colonial legacy and emerge as a truly sovereign and self-determined nation, capable of directing the complexities of the contemporary geopolitical landscape with confidence and resilience (Asim, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

“True independence and freedom can only exist in doing what's right”.  
(Brigham Young)

The paradoxical institutional dynamics within Pakistan's foreign policy apparatus emphasize the complexities of directing sovereignty and alignment in its relations with Russia. While governmental bodies strive for closer ties, segments within the military and bureaucracy uphold pro-US policies, reflecting enduring colonial legacies and geopolitical realities. However, to truly assert its independence and advance its national interests, Pakistan must transcend these constraints and forge a unified vision that prioritizes sovereignty and mutual cooperation with Russia. Embracing solidarity and inclusivity, Pakistan can steer the evolving global landscape with confidence, promoting a future marked by strengthened Pakistan-Russia ties, mutual prosperity and regional stability.

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