

Navigating the Post-Western Moment: Russia–Pakistan Cooperation as a Case Study of Emerging Multipolar Diplomacy

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Abstract

The study examines Russia–Pakistan cooperation between 2014 and 2026 as a case study of how middle powers and recovering great powers practise adaptive diplomacy in a multipolar international system. It poses a single guiding question: how and why have two states with divergent strategic identities and Cold-War-era hostility constructed a sustained pattern of selective cooperation and what does this partnership reveal about state behaviour in the post-Western order? The study employs a qualitative case-study design built on process tracing of bilateral agreements, official communiques and multilateral statements, complemented by discourse analysis of foreign-policy declarations from both governments. Five empirical domains are reconstructed: defence and counterterrorism, Afghanistan diplomacy, energy and oil trade, Eurasian connectivity and multilateral engagement through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The findings indicate that the relationship is neither an alliance nor a tactical convergence but a structured pattern of hedging-driven selective partnership shaped by three reinforcing logics, shared interest in regional stabilisation following the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, complementary needs created by Western sanctions on Russia and Pakistan's geo-economic pivot and a shared preference for non-Western multilateral platforms. The article contributes to International Relations theory by showing that adaptive diplomacy now operates through layered, non-exclusive partnerships rather than fixed alignments, with implications for the future Eurasian security architecture and for ongoing debates on global order transition.

Keywords: Post-Western international order, Multipolar diplomacy, Russia–Pakistan cooperation, Strategic hedging, Eurasian security, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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Introduction

The international order is slowly shifting away from a unipolar period that dominated the post-Cold War international system. With the new setting increasingly characterised by scholars as a post-Western order, authority, influence and normative leadership are no longer found solely in the Euro-Atlantic core but spread across a broader array of both state and non-state entities.¹ In this context, the politics of alignment has become more pliable. Today, states are not picking between rigid blocs; they are building layered partnerships, a kind of coalition focused on distinct issue areas where they can gain maximum strategic autonomy without excessive exposure to any one patron.² It is most clearly seen by middle powers and recovering great powers in contested regional spaces and it is in such regional areas that the limits of conventional alliance theory are most clearly visible.

The dynamics of relations between Russia and Pakistan are one such case that shows how these adaptive practices play out. During the entire Cold War period, the two states were adversaries in the bipolar competition, with Pakistan being a charter member of the United States-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), and the Soviet Union engaged in a deep strategic partnership with India with arms transfers, diplomatic backing and the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.³ The problem of mutual suspicion continued to fester for long after the Cold War had ended and Pakistan's reliance on the USA was further exacerbated to control the spread of militancy spreading from Afghanistan. However, since around 2014, both sides gradually moved forward towards a more substantive relationship, addressing not only defence cooperation and counterterrorism training, but also diplomacy, Afghanistan, energy, trade and the coordination of multilateral efforts under the SCO.

The conventional International Relations theories are unable to explain this process. The balance of threat theory suggests that states under acute threat will engage in strong alliances with other states in order to combat the common threat,⁴ while the Structural Realist view suggests the possibility of balancing or band wagoning against the strongest power.⁵ Russia is not the one that has abandoned a strategic partnership with India and Pakistan has not changed their security ties with the United States

¹Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 1–14.

²Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85.

³Hasan-Askari Rizvi, *Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment: A Study of Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 67–82.

⁴Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17–33.

⁵Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 125–28.

or all-weather partnership with China. In contrast, the two states have developed a clearly defined and limited, sectoral and non-exclusive form of cooperation without falling into any given category of alliances. The paper addresses two core questions: Empirically, what is the nature of Russia–Pakistan cooperation? Theoretically, what does this continuity in cooperation tell us about state behaviour in systemic transition?

Current scholarship on Russia–Pakistan relations focuses either on the relationship as a battleground, a reaction to the changing US policy for both countries, or as a result of the Sino-Russian connection with Islamabad, downplaying the bilateral relationship as a tool of larger great-power games.⁶ Only a few studies investigate the relationship as a political form of adaptive diplomacy, and even fewer connect bilateral cases to theoretical discussions on multipolar transition, multipolar hedging, and multipolar network diplomacy. Although the empirical aspects of the partnership have recently been studied by Pakistani-origin publications, these works have not analyzed them within a comprehensive analytical framework based on recent debates surrounding the post-Western order. This article aims to fill this gap.

The article concludes that Russia–Pakistan relations can be analysed as a form of adaptive multipolar diplomacy, a structured non-binding form of collaboration, where two states with overlapping interests, asymmetric capacities and different relationships to the Western order collaborate on a set of limited issues and maintain ‘room to manoeuvre’ with other powers. It is expanded by three pillars of analysis: hedging, selective partnership and network diplomacy, and is supported by empirical evidence from the time frame 2014–2026. The contribution is of two kinds. Theoretically, the study extends the literature on hedging from its original focus on the Southeast Asian context to the case of South Asia, involving a former hostile dyad, and it operationalises the concept of network diplomacy in a context where both players are already in a different network. It is empirically the first systematic, source-traced reconstruction of Russia–Pakistan cooperation as a single case study in five domains.

Section 2 develops the conceptual foundation followed by the research design in Section 3. Section 4 presents the empirical record of Russia–Pakistan cooperation across five key domains, while Section 5 provides the analytical synthesis. Section 6 explores the broader regional implications, and Section 7 concludes the paper.

⁶Andrew Korybko, “Russia’s Pakistani Pivot: Strategic, Tactical or Symbolic?” *Russia in Global Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2020): 84–101.

Conceptual Foundation: The Post-Western Order, Hedging and Network Diplomacy

■ *The Post-Western Order and the Multiplex World*

A post-Western international order is based on the premise that a single core of material power no longer exists, normative authority and institutional leadership in the West. Acharya's concept of a multiplex world provides a description of this context: a world of multiple centres of power, with multiple overlapping institutional layers and multiple, parallel, non-convergent normative traditions.⁷ Another perspective is by Buzan & Lawson, who claim that the current one is an "international social structure shift." affecting not only material capacities but also norms and institutions, as well as "recognised patterns of interaction."⁸ Ikenberry, from a more measured liberal perspective, agrees with him that the rules-based order is under stress, but does not want to read into the situation that a new, coherent architecture is taking its place.⁹ All these accounts concur on one important descriptive fact: this is a more pluralistic, more institutionally complex, and more revisionist, or flexible, era of international politics than the unipolar 1990s.

In realist scholarship, multipolarity is analysed as pushing towards a greater polarity of power relations.¹⁰ However, even realist analysis recognises that states in the modern era are engaged in what Lo calls "qualified partnerships", forms of "cooperation with ongoing low-level hedging against the partner."¹¹ Lukin's analysis on the Sino-Russian rapprochement is parallel: Even in the closest recent entente, it is more flexible than a treaty alliance, with each partner being allowed to pursue its own relationships with third parties.¹² These analyses come together to suggest that the tension of multipolarity gives more weight to the option for flexibility than commitment.

■ *Hedging and Strategic Autonomy*

The idea behind hedging arose from the studies of Southeast Asia that led Goh to view the concept as a combination of engagement and indirect balancing to deal with uncertainties regarding the intentions

⁷Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony," 271–76.

⁸Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–24.

⁹G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23.

¹⁰John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 360–411.

¹¹Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 99–124.

¹²Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 145–72.

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of a rising power.¹³ Kuik then differentiated between hedging behaviours on a ‘balancing-bandwagoning’ continuum.¹⁴ Tessman expanded this concept by making it a rational response to uncertainty in the distribution of power in the future.¹⁵ Haacke restitches strategic autonomy in hedging: preserving freedom of action in various foreign-policy areas.¹⁶ In these contributions, hedging is seen, first, as a means of mitigating uncertainty, which is not an attempt to stave off an existing threat, and second, as a policy that pursues multiple dimensions of foreign policy at the same time.

Pakistan has embraced the language of hedging both at the level of scholarship and policy talk. Husain charts the country’s shift from a security-based to geo-economic foreign policy, and Saghir, Karim and Saleem define Pakistan’s modern foreign policy as being one that has to be “multidirectional balancing”, building multiple non-exclusive ties with China, the USA, the Gulf states and Russia.¹⁷ Lodhi’s previous analysis on Pakistani strategic thinking predicted this trend, stating that the country’s structural location in a multifaceted region between South, Central and West Asia forced it to chart a path toward diversified approaches to its relations.¹⁸ A different register of hedging vocabulary can be seen in Russia: While Connolly’s analysis of post-2014 Russian political economy shows how western sanctions hastened Russia’s pursuit of associations and partnerships in the steppe belt of Eurasia and Asia as a calculated move to diversify away from European markets and finance.¹⁹ Trenin has consistently maintained that the Russian pivot to the East should be interpreted not as a complete strategy shift but instead as a hedge against the closing down of the West.²⁰ Otherwise, Pakistan and Russia come from different beginnings but with similar motives.

¹³Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005), 1–8.

¹⁴Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior toward China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 55 (2008): 159–85.

¹⁵Brock F. Tessman, “System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 192–231.

¹⁶Jürgen Haacke, “The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 375–417.

¹⁷Abdul Saghir, Adnan Karim, and Muhammad Sheharyar Saleem, “Pakistan’s Multidirectional Balancing: A Realist Analysis of Strategic Autonomy in an Era of Great Power Competition,” *Social Sciences & Humanity Research Review* 5, no. 1 (2025): 118–24.

¹⁸Maleeha Lodhi, ed., *Pakistan: Beyond the Crisis State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3–17.

¹⁹Richard Connolly, *Russia’s Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft Is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 175–210.

²⁰Dmitri Trenin, *Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 88–112.

■ ***Selective Partnership and Network Diplomacy***

Wilkins introduces the idea of alignment without alliance because it seeks to encapsulate sustained, but limited, cooperative relations, not necessarily tied to a lasting alliance; structured, but nonbinding, cooperative relations; and cooperative relations that are built around specific issue areas and do not necessarily span the whole range of foreign policy.²¹ In this sense, selective partnership is not an inadequate type of partnership, but rather a unique organisational logic, appropriate to circumstances where states prefer flexibility over commitment. A complementary point which Slaughter makes in his analysis of networked statecraft is that today's diplomacy is all about multiple, interlaced and bilateral webs of relations, regional and multilateral alike, and that state power is manifested by occupying a beneficial position in a net of relations as opposed to dominating a hierarchical alliance.²²

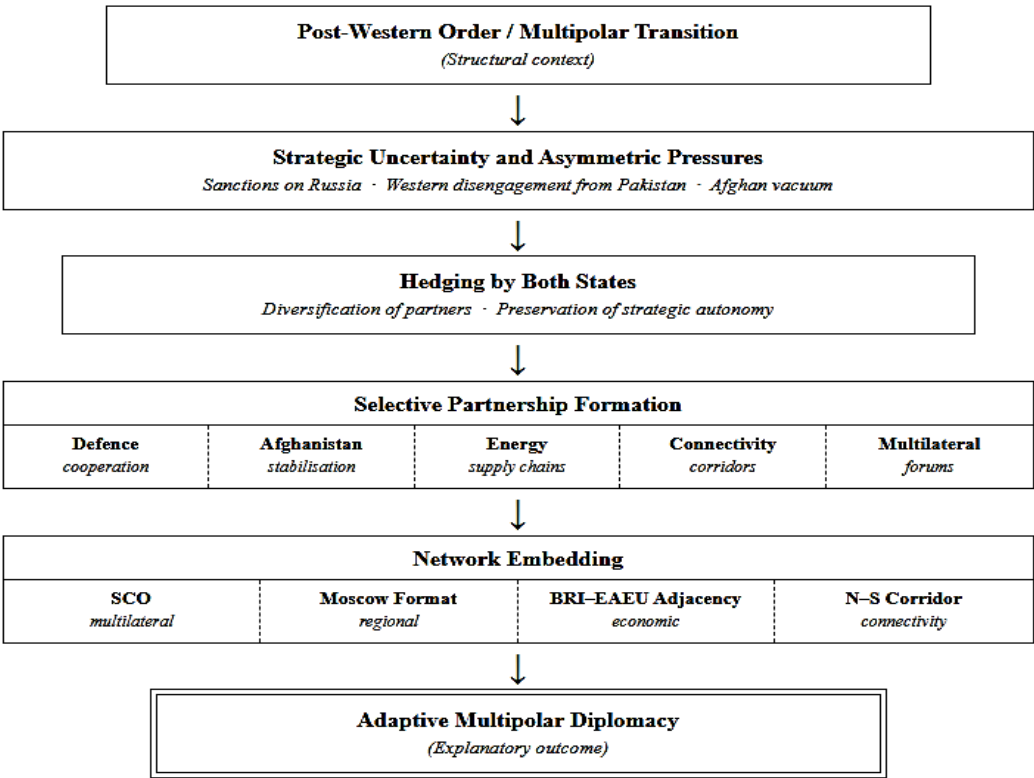
■ ***Analytical Framework***

In synthesising the literature, this article draws on three different spheres of analysis for Russia–Pakistan cooperation. The systemic logic comes from a condition of uncertainty regarding the distribution of power in the future: in such an environment, both states diversify their sets of partners to maintain freedom of action. Organisational form: selective partnership: cooperation is focused on specific issue areas, and is organised through temporary but stable institutional arrangements and with clear boundaries so as not to encompass any of the partners' other commitments. Diplomacy on systems/positions: The value of each state for another state not only stems from its strategic situation but also from the wider network in which it takes part and from multilateral platforms and bilateral channels of network cooperation. The three concepts are at different levels of abstraction, covering various aspects of the same phenomenon: hedging accounts for the phenomenon of states' cooperation; selective partnership for the organisation of such cooperation; and network diplomacy for the location of such cooperation in the larger international landscape.

²¹Thomas S. Wilkins, "Alignment', Not 'Alliance': The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53–76.

²²Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 5–17.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Adaptive Multipolar Diplomacy



Source: developed by the author from the literature reviewed during Conceptual Foundation.

Research Design and Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative and single case research using Russia–Pakistan cooperation between 2014 and 2026 as a case study. The case-study approach is appropriate for the research question since it allows the examination of the process of decisions, agreements, and diplomatic exchanges that have led to the construction of the relationship, and makes it possible to move beyond the partnership as a final product. This design incorporates and integrates two approaches: process tracing and discourse analysis.

- **Process Tracing:** Process tracing works backward from the actions in the five domains that lead to bilateral cooperation, back to the systemic conditions. The typology is based on Beach and Pedersen’s theory testing approach, which categorizes the implications that are expected to be observed from a theory and the record is then evaluated for consistency.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Joint and government statements, communiqués and ministerial briefings are analysed to reveal the strategic narrative that each government uses to explain why

cooperation is beneficial and what they are setting out to tell their audiences. The analysis follows the discursive-institutionalist vein, where foreign-policy discourse is seen as descriptive and at the same time as constitutive of choices for foreign-policy action that can open or close possibilities for further action.

- **Data Sources:** Five sources of primary material are used. First, bilateral agreements are being formulated, such as the pact for defence cooperation signed in November 2014, and a different agreement on North–South Gas Pipeline in October 2015, and another amended intergovernmental agreement on a renamed Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline in May 2021. Second, official statements released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan (MOFA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of Pakistan and the Russian Ministry of Defence. Third, multilateral communiqués, in particular the statements of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan (the last conference was on 4 October 2024), and In the Heart of Asia declarations at the annual meetings of the SCO since Pakistan’s accession in June 2017. Fourth, trade and economic data statistics from the Ministry of Commerce Pakistan, State Bank of Pakistan and customs statistics of Russia were also used for triangulation of claims about the course of bilateral trade. Fifth, secondary sources refer to the policy report released by SIPRI, Carnegie Endowment, Chatham House and the Institute of South Asian Studies which record the information not available elsewhere.
- **Analytical Procedure:** Source material was organized in a time bound order, across the 5 domains. To reduce the risk of relying on a single source, key episodes were triangulated between at least two different sources. The divergence in the characterisation of an episode between Moscow and Islamabad was itself analytically interesting. The empirical record was then translated into the three analytical concepts, which is formalised in table 2.
- **Scope and limitations:** The study does not make any inferences beyond the time it covers. It is a one-case study and thus cannot claim to draw general conclusions on the overall prevalence of the Russia–Pakistan pattern. No classified or backchannel communications are included, because they are not apparent in the documents. No consideration is given to the “depth” of cooperation; only the apparent architecture is examined.

Empirical Analysis: Russia–Pakistan Cooperation across Five Domains

Table 1: Domains of Russia-Pakistan Cooperation, 2014-2026

Domain	Key Evidence	Period
Defence cooperation pact	Pakistan and Russia signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement in Moscow during the November 2014 visit of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, described in joint Pakistani and Russian statements as a 'milestone' in restoring military-to-military ties.	2014
Joint military exercises (Druzhba series)	Counterterrorism exercises launched in 2016 and held annually with limited interruptions. Druzhba-VII was conducted in 2024 and Druzhba-VIII was held between 15 and 27 September 2025, focused on counterterrorism, drone warfare, urban combat and counter-IED operations.	2016–2025
Arms and military equipment	Russia approved the sale of four Mi-35M attack helicopters in 2014; deliveries were completed in subsequent years. Talks on additional defence procurement have continued, although Russia has consistently calibrated transfers to limit damage to its strategic partnership with India.	2014–2026
Counterterrorism coordination	Repeated framing of the Druzhba series around counterterrorism, regular bilateral consultations and convergent positions in the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) processes targeting groups based in Afghanistan and Central Asia.	2014–2026
Afghanistan diplomacy	Pakistan participated in successive rounds of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan. The sixth meeting on 4 October 2024 included Pakistan among ten regional participants; Russia subsequently signalled that the seventh meeting would convene in autumn 2025.	2017–2026
Energy infrastructure	Original October 2015 intergovernmental agreement on the Karachi–Lahore North–South Gas Pipeline; renamed Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) under the amended intergovernmental agreement signed in May 2021. Implementation has been repeatedly affected by sanctions exposure and financing constraints.	2015–2026
Russian crude-oil trade	Pakistan's first government-arranged Russian crude cargo arrived at Karachi in June 2023, paid for through a renminbi-denominated mechanism; the first private-sector Russian crude cargo followed in October 2023. Cargoes have continued on an irregular commercial basis.	2023–2026
Bilateral trade and transport	Bilateral trade turnover reportedly exceeded US\$1 billion for the first time in 2023 and reached approximately US\$1.8 billion in FY 2023–24 before contracting slightly in FY 2024–25. Discussion of preferential trade agreements with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is ongoing as of 2026.	2023–2026
Industrial cooperation	July 2025 agreement at the Innoprom forum in Yekaterinburg to revive and modernise Pakistan Steel Mills, originally built in 1973 with Soviet technical assistance and dormant in industrial operations since 2015; barter-trade memoranda concluded in October 2024 cover chickpeas, rice, mandarins, potatoes and red lentils.	2024–2026
Multilateral engagement	Pakistan became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in June 2017 alongside India; sustained participation in SCO heads-of-state and prime-ministerial summits; Russia and Pakistan have coordinated on connectivity, counterterrorism and Afghanistan within SCO working groups.	2017–2026

Sources: Press releases of Inter-Services Public Relations Pakistan (2016-2025), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, joint statements of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan (2017-2024), Pakistan Ministry of Commerce trade statistics (FY 2023-24), Pakistan-Russia Trade and Investment Forum Communiqué, Moscow, 2-3 October 2024, Innoprom Yekaterinburg forum 2025 reporting.

■ ***Defence and Counterterrorism Cooperation***

The most visible and specific area of partnership is defence cooperation, and it is also the most tightly cordoned-off. The first bilateral defence cooperation pact was signed in November 2014 in Islamabad following a Russian defence minister's visit there led by Sergei Shoigu, and marked the beginning of a long absence of formal military contacts between the two states.²³ In 2016, the Druzhba (Friendship) joint exercise series was started, putting this opening into practice at the operational level. The latest version of Druzhba-VIII took place between 15 and 27 September 2025 on Russian soil and while “drone warfare, fighting in built-up areas and counter improvised explosive devices” were the themes of the latest edition, according to ISPR.²⁴ Both states have focused on operational missions that have consistently been counterterrorism-focused, and given that their interests overlap, they can work toward further interoperability, while sidestepping the political trade-offs involved in training for inter-state warfare.

The same goes for arms transfers. The four Mi-35M helicopters sold in 2014 marked the symbolic end of Moscow's hesitation to sell large platforms to Pakistan, although the volume has been relatively small, compared with its bigger procurement deals with the other side.²⁵ Russia has taken care in doing these transfers so that its strategic partnership with India is not undermined. Cooperation has now been brought to a levelled-off but conscious low baseline, and both are avoiding a full-fledged defence arrangement such as those between Russia and Belarus, or Pakistan and China.

■ ***The Afghanistan Factor***

Afghanistan has proved to be an incentive to Russia–Pakistan cooperation and a stress test for it. Since the withdrawal of US forces and the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021, both countries have been experiencing serious concerns with overlapping consequences: one for Russia is the spread of militancy in Central Asia, and another for Pakistan is the influx of cross-border attacks from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associated groups from Afghan-controlled territory.²⁶ The main and primary channel of these concerns has been through the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, which have started as a 6-party mechanism in 2017 and expanded to 10 parties by

²³Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018,” SIPRI Fact Sheet (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2019), 5–7.

²⁴Inter-Services Public Relations, Press Release No. PR-301/2025-ISPR, “Pakistan–Russia Joint Exercise Druzhba-VIII,” Rawalpindi, 26 September 2025.

²⁵Wezeman and Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018,” 6.

²⁶Mark N. Katz, “Russia and the Taliban: Common Ground or Strange Bedfellows?” *Russia in Global Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2022): 138–55.

2024 and are under the leadership of the Russian side. During the sixth meeting on 4 October 2024, Pakistan was among the other countries in the region, which also comprised China, India, Iran and the Central Asian states; the joint communiqué made special mention of cooperation in counterterrorism and urged the Afghan authorities to prevent the use of Afghan land for neutralizing any act aimed at the neighbouring countries.²⁷ Russia's Supreme Court in April 2025 lifted the legal ban on the Taliban, paving the way for a more institutionalised Russian collaboration with the Taliban-led government in Kabul,²⁸ a move that Islamabad closely monitored, as it grapples with relations with the same government.

■ ***Energy and Oil Trade***

The most ambitious aspect of design of energy cooperation has been the most limited in implementation as well. In October 2015, there was an original intergovernmental deal on the gas pipeline between Karachi and Lahore (later North-South) to provide finance and technical assistance by Russia to the initiative to bring LNG import terminals to Karachi and supply them to the consumption centres further North.²⁹ The original contract was delayed for a long period and was substituted in May 2021 with an amended intergovernmental agreement on the re-named PSGP that has new funding splits and a longer construction period. Financing constraints, pressures of sanctions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and volatile commercial outlook in gas market of Pakistan have adversely affected the implementation.

The more significant short-term development has been the opening up of the trade in oil. The first Russian crude cargo paid under a discount agreement, through a mechanism not in dollars, arrived in Pakistan at its port of Karachi in June 2023, followed by the first under private-sector in October 2023.³⁰ Although it has been small by Pakistan's standards for Gulf imports and the volume of oil brought in has never been that high, it is significant: every such shipment is a sign that the logistical, financial and political mechanisms for continued trading have been in place.

²⁷Joint Statement of the Sixth Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, Moscow, 4 October 2024.

²⁸Tatiana Stanovaya, "Moscow's Taliban Recognition: Strategic Calculation or Improvisation?" Carnegie Politika commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2025.

²⁹James Henderson and Tatiana Mitrova, *Energy Relations between Russia and Asia*, OIES Paper NG 152 (Oxford: Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2020), 19–28.

³⁰Andrej Krickovic, "Imperial Nostalgia or Prudent Geopolitics? Russia's Efforts to Reintegrate the Post-Soviet Space in Geopolitical Perspective," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2017): 140–58.

■ ***Eurasian Connectivity and Geo-Economics***

Russia-Pakistan cooperation is put into the widest geo-economic perspective in the context of connectivity cooperation. Being a hub of South, Central and West Asia and CPEC being the flagship corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has made it a strategic crossroads in the broader Eurasian connectivity network of corridors and tenders.³¹ Russia's interest in this architecture is double; on one hand, Moscow would like to assure that evolving Eurasian connectivity does not leave out any Russian-led institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and on the other, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has been a long-held interest of Russia and Pakistan is a possible southern endpoint or a nearby gateway for it.³² Pakistan has been having intensified consultations for a possible preferential trade deal with EAEU since 2024 and signed MOUs during the 1–3 October 2024 Pakistan–Russia Trade and Investment Forum in Moscow. The July 2025 Innoprom agreement regarding the revival of Pakistan Steel Mills, which was built in 1974 with Soviet assistance and has been inactive since 2015, is a case in point for the geo-economic nature of this event: a practical initiative and a symbolic gesture of the present cooperation between Pakistan and Russia connecting back to the technical support provided in the past.³³

■ ***Multilateral Engagement and the SCO***

Pakistan's full membership of the SCO in June 2017 along with India created the most significant institutional framework for future collaboration of the two countries with Russia. The SCO has served as the platform for coordinated comments on counterterrorism measures; regional connectivity and post-Western multilateralism and its working mechanisms; in particular the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent; have offered a practicum forum for regular cooperation.³⁴ The SCO is not a security alliance, hence the coordination between the two countries is not binding; however, through the platform, at the same time the ministerial-level contact, joint declaration and operational mechanisms are also produced, which could not be maintained by bilateral diplomacy on the same scale.

³¹Siegfried O. Wolf, *The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 230–58.

³²Nargis Kassenova, "China's Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union: Toward Compatibility?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 10, no. 1 (2018): 92–100.

³³Alexander Gabuev, *Russia's Eastern Pivot: Beyond a Tactical Retreat* (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations Report, 2019), 21–28.

³⁴Thomas Ambrosio, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Sustainable Counterweight to the West?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 115–34.

Russia–Pakistan Interaction as Adaptive Multipolar Diplomacy

Table 2: Analytical Mapping of Russia–Pakistan Cooperation onto the Three-Part Framework

Domain	Hedging Logic (why)	Selective Partnership (how)	Network Diplomacy (where)
Defence and counterterrorism	Russia diversifies away from over-reliance on Indian defence custom; Pakistan diversifies away from over-reliance on US security cooperation, especially post-2021.	Cooperation confined to counterterrorism training and modest equipment transfers; explicitly bounded to avoid disrupting Russia–India or Pakistan–China relationships.	Druzhba exercises operate alongside Pakistan's parallel exercises with China and historic ties with the Gulf, embedding bilateral cooperation in a wider network of training partners.
Afghanistan diplomacy	Both states hedge against the indeterminacy of Taliban consolidation and against the absence of a Western-led stabilisation framework after 2021.	Engagement channelled through the Moscow Format rather than a bilateral coordination mechanism, preserving each side's autonomy in dealing with Kabul.	Moscow Format ties Russia–Pakistan exchange into a ten-party regional configuration including China, Iran, India and the Central Asian states.
Energy and oil trade	Russia hedges against the closure of European energy markets; Pakistan hedges against supplier concentration and dollar-system vulnerability.	Pipeline cooperation deliberately limited by sanctions exposure; oil trade conducted on a cargo-by-cargo commercial basis with non-dollar settlement.	Trade conducted through renminbi-denominated settlement embeds the relationship in the Sino-Russian financial network and the wider de-dollarisation discourse.
Eurasian connectivity	Russia hedges against Chinese dominance of the BRI; Pakistan hedges against connectivity dependence on a single corridor.	Engagement through trade and investment fora and MoUs rather than binding agreements; PSM revival kept at the level of industrial cooperation.	Pakistan–EAEU consultations and INSTC adjacency link Russia–Pakistan engagement to wider Eurasian institutional architectures.
Multilateral engagement (SCO)	Both states hedge against the perceived limits of Western-led multilateralism by investing in non-Western platforms.	SCO functions as a coordination venue, not an alliance; commitments remain consultative and non-binding.	SCO embeds Russia–Pakistan engagement within an eight-member regional organisation that includes their other key partners (China) and rivals (India).

Source: author's analysis based on the empirical material reconstructed in Empirical Analysis and the analytical framework developed in Conceptual Foundation.

▪ *Hedging as Systemic Logic*

The same hedging logic is present in each row of Table 2. Russia's strategy of diversifying its partners comes on top of the post-2014 scenario of partial economic and diplomatic isolation from the West.

Now, the Pakistan route is part of the wider portfolio, which also includes Iran, the Gulf countries, India, China, and Türkiye. The post-2018 “geo-economic” reorientation and the post-2021 closing of the Afghan transit route, have made the value of relations that do not involve Pakistan in one great power’s strategic projects.³⁵ It is not about finding a common enemy: neither state says the other’s main partners are a threat to them: but it is about their preference for keeping strategic optionality. This is exactly the kind of hedging that Tessman and Haacke are talking about: it is reacting to uncertainty about the system, not to a threat, and it is not necessarily single-domain, but multi-domains.

■ *Selective Partnership as Organisational Form*

The form and structure of cooperation is very similar to Wilkins’ notion of “alignment without alliance”: it is durable but limited, structured but non-binding, and is focused on a limited set of issues and areas, rather than on the entirety of foreign policy.³⁶ Five typical characteristics of selective partnership can be seen in the empirical record. Cooperation is limited: cooperation takes place in five distinct areas and is not intended to extend beyond them, both sides do not wish to evolve towards full strategic harmonization. Secondly instruments are calibrated: the main instruments are joint exercises and intergovernmental agreements and ministerial dialogue, not treaty alliances or basing arrangements. Third, commitment is reversible, that is, there are no irreversible costs, either incurred by the partner or by the partner by not entering into a formal alliance obligation. Fourth, a third-party effect is controlled - both the states have put a lot of diplomatic effort into assuring third parties (India, China, the United States, Gulf states) that the partnership is not against them. Fifth, institutionalisation is shallow, the relationship does not have any joint command structure, does not have any permanent secretariat and does not have any binding dispute-resolution mechanism. These features are in fact non-deficiencies but a part of the partnership.

■ *Network Diplomacy and Systemic Position*

The third column of Table 2 makes the connection to the network dimension. The bilateral track is based within a wider framework with other states, institutions, and informal arrangements in each of the domains. Regarding cooperation in defence, Pakistan is engaged with China, Türkiye, and the United States in exercises; Afghanistan related diplomacy is conducted within the context of participation in the Moscow Format with eight other countries; and energy cooperation is managed through Chinese financial mechanisms, with the EAEU agreement discussed as compatible with the

³⁵Saghir, Karim and Saleem, “Pakistan’s Multidirectional Balancing,” 118–22.

³⁶Wilkins, “Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’,” 60–68.

BRI. What Slaughter calls networked statecraft is the practice of state power through the use of advantageous positions within overhanging networks instead of through exclusive ties.³⁷ For Pakistan, this is what Goh, the “omni-enmeshment”, is all about - to gain strategic edges by over-entangling with several overlapping relationships. For Russia, it is the fellow-travelling equivalent of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, a more intense involvement with a wide range of partners, not driven by but sustained by Beijing.³⁸

■ ***Implications for International Relations Theory***

There are three implications for IR theory from the case. First, it acknowledges that hedging is a separate concept from balancing and band wagoning, and is not necessarily a Southeast Asian phenomenon. The historical record of Russia-Pakistan relations shows no clear-cut bloc behaviour as expected under the balance of threat theory, nor is there any obvious asymmetric submission in line with the band wagoning theory, but rather a middle-of-the-road pattern that is well covered by hedging theory.³⁹ Secondly, the case further illustrates Wilkins’s framework of aligning without joining allies and demonstrates that this framework could involve a recovering great power—in this instance, Britain—with a middle power, in this case, France. Third, it shows how network-diplomacy analysis can be extended by considering the stable bilateral track that can be made between two states formed in partially overlapping and partially competing networks just because each one knows the other’s wider commitments. The Russia-Pakistan record would thus be a contribution to the existing literature on adaptive state behaviour in the post-Western order.

Regional Implications: South Asian and Eurasian Security Architecture

The extent of the Russia- Pakistan relationship is evident not only bilaterally, but also within the broader context of the South Asian and South Eurasian security architecture. This is a double-edged sword: it undermines the idea of the historical connection between Moscow and New Delhi while simultaneously helping to build a more pluralistic regional security order with the presence of middle powers with meaningful agency.

- **South Asian Implications:** It has been the tradition of South Asian regional security design to balance external powers in a rivalry of two major powers, namely India and Pakistan.

³⁷Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web*, 8–17.

³⁸Lukin, *China and Russia*, 165–72.

³⁹Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 718–25.

Pakistan's selective engagement with Russia makes for a complex but not a different architecture. New Delhi's strategic partnership with Moscow continues to swallow up the bulk of the Russian defence exports to South Asia and continues to be politically pivotal in Russian thought.⁴⁰ The Russia–Pakistan track is designed to complement, not replace, the Russia–India track, and creates a more three-dimensional South Asian system with its implications for crisis management and South Asian integration that are yet to be fully examined.⁴¹

- **Eurasian Implications:** Russia-Pakistan cooperation is on the rise in terms of building an institutional framework at the Eurasian level, in which the SCO, the Moscow Format, the EAEU and the BRI work together, without merging into one bloc. A potential agreement for Pakistan to move closer towards a preferential agreement with the EAEU (under consultation since early 2026): would bring the country closer to the Russian-led economic space but would not involve it in political alignment with Russia. Likewise, Russia's cooperation with the Taliban-ruled Afghan government, which, after the federal court's decision in April 2025, is now formalised, opens the door for a more institutionalised Russia-Pakistan coordination for the stabilisation work in Afghanistan.⁴² These developments are only the “overlying” of new forms of cooperation on a regionally diverse space, rather than the creation of a “bloc of Eurasian nations.” These are not the creation of a bloc of “Eurasian nations.” These can be seen as the “overlying” of new forms of collaboration onto a regionally pluralistic space.

Conclusion

Russia-Pakistan cooperation in the period 2014-2026 is an example of “adaptive multipolar diplomacy,” defined as a structured pattern of hedging-driven, selective partnership between two actors that engage in multipolar diplomacy through “layered networks” without binding commitments. The empirical reconstruction in five areas—defence, Afghanistan, energy, connectivity, and multilateral engagements: reflects genuine but limited, persistent but noncommittal cooperation and a conscious effort to walk the delicate tightrope of keeping other pledges alive. This pattern is traced back to three reinforcing logics: hedging as the reaction to systemic uncertainty, selective partnership

⁴⁰Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, updated ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 142–48.

⁴¹Ashley J. Tellis, “India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 5 (2023): 58–73.

⁴²Bobo Lo and Lilia Shevtsova, *A 21st Century Myth: Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012), 47–58.

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as the type of organisation for the cooperation on specific issues, and network diplomacy as the systemic position of an organisation in overlapping regional architectures. The contributions of the article are threefold. First, it extends the hedging literature from its original Southeast Asian environment to a South Asian instance of alignment without alliance between a recovering great power and a middle power. Second, it shows that the concepts of alignment without alliance is applicable not just between middle powers, but also between a recovering great power and a middle power. Third, it provides the first systematic and source-traced reconstruction of the cooperation between Russia and Pakistan as a single case across five empirical domains, with analytical mapping that demonstrates how each domain relates to a corresponding strategic logic.

From a theoretical perspective, it supports the thesis that today's world pattern of international relations is dominated by "layered", non-exclusive partnerships of adaptation. The relationship is a path in policy terms for Pakistan to find strategic diversification while for Russia it is a way to get a presence in South Asia without any commitments with regards to India and China. For other middle powers, the case indicates that it is possible and sustainable to choose a partnership with a hedging Great Power as long as scope is kept under control.

The wider implications of the case relate to the enigma of the architecture of the new Eurasian order. Russia–Pakistan cooperation is not, in itself, a game-changer in international politics; however, in this—as in many instances of adaptive partnership—it provides evidence regarding the texture of the world that is superseding the unipolar moment in Western dominated international politics. In that world, there will be no successor-hegemon and no counter-bloc—only partnerships that overlap and are calibrated and coordinated on a case-by-case basis. Cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, therefore, is a miniature version of the diplomatic language of multipolarity.