

Pakistan's President Zardari visits Moscow

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President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan paid a three-day official visit to Russia last week. During the visit Zardari, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), held discussions on military and strategic cooperation, as well as economic projects, with Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev and other senior figures in the Kremlin.

The three-day trip follows a summit held in the Russian resort of Sochi last summer, where Medvedev established a joint security forum with Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. Its stated purpose was undertaking joint security and economic projects. Since then, the four countries have committed to plans for a new "Silk Road" from Russia to the Indian Ocean, exporting oil, natural gas and electricity.

Zardari's visit is a high water mark in Russia-Pakistan relations, which historically have not been close. While the USSR backed India during the Cold War, Pakistan was supported by the United States and China. Relations between Islamabad and Moscow reached a low point during the 1980s, as the Kremlin bureaucracy waged a war in Afghanistan to prop up its allied regime in Kabul. Pakistan and the United States backed rebel *mujahedin* fighters against the Kabul regime.

Of central importance to both the Pakistani leadership and the Kremlin is the US-NATO war in Afghanistan. While Pakistan remains a key US ally, there are growing strains in the US-Pakistani relationship. This found its sharpest expression in the US assassination of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad on the eve of Zardari's trip to Russia.

The killing of the Al Qaeda leader was carried out behind the backs of the Pakistani government and military, in violation of Pakistani sovereignty, and in a garrison city that hosts Pakistan's national military academy. The US Special Forces "hit" on Bin Laden could easily have spiraled out of control, potentially bringing US and Pakistani military forces into a direct conflict.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, also of the PPP, reacted to the Abbottabad raid with a warning

that his government would not tolerate any similar incursion in the future. "Pakistan reserves the right to retaliate with full force," Gilani told parliament. "No one should underestimate the resolve and capability of our nation and armed forces to defend our sacred homeland."

Islamabad and Washington have also been involved in a bitter dispute over CIA agent Raymond Davis, who killed two Pakistanis on the streets of Lahore but was shielded from prosecution by the US. The Pakistani intelligence agency leaked the name of the CIA station chief in Pakistan in retaliation for the Davis case.

Islamabad has also been forced to criticize the US for its military incursions into Pakistan. There is mass outrage at the killing of hundreds of people, mainly civilians, in Predator drone air raids in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province.

Behind these flashpoints, tensions between Islamabad and Washington are stoked by US imperialism's attempt to maintain hegemony in the region at the expense of its main rivals, Russia and China.

Washington's colonial war in Afghanistan aims to give the Pentagon a permanent garrison in the heart of Asia—bordering the former Soviet Union, South Asia and China—to project influence throughout the region. This has undermined Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and threatened a web of relations between Islamabad and various Islamist and militant groups in Afghanistan.

Adding further fuel to the fire, Washington is developing close relations with India, Pakistan's principal regional rival. This includes helping New Delhi develop its nuclear industry. By thus courting India, the US hopes to win an ally against China, Pakistan's closest ally.

Moscow did not, however, solidarize itself with Pakistan's public rebuke of the US for launching the Abbottabad raid. Rather, the Kremlin and Russian media praised US methods in the killing. Russia officially supports the principle of using military strikes against

terrorists in foreign countries.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview last week that Moscow fully backed the US Navy SEALs who killed Bin Laden. “After September 11, 2001 the UN Security Council adopted a resolution recognizing the United States’ right to self-defense under article 51 of the UN Charter. And the right to self-defense is not subject to any restrictions,” Lavrov told *Moskovskie Novosti* as Zardari arrived in Russia.

While the Kremlin is seeking to curry favor with Islamabad, the Russian ruling elite will aggressively pursue its own strategic interests in the region. It is engaged in a conflict with Islamist separatist militants in the North Caucasus, while thousands of Russian troops are stationed in former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Moscow plans to send up to 3,000 troops to the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, ostensibly to guard the border with Afghanistan. A Russian security official told Reuters the planned deployment aims to fill a power vacuum if there is a major NATO pullout from Afghanistan in 2014: “Twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow sees Central Asia as part of its sphere of interest and worries that an upsurge in Islamist violence or heroin trafficking could upset the predominantly Muslim, oil- and gas-producing region.”

Beyond concerns about Muslim terrorists or the drug trade, the Kremlin is seeking to develop and maintain relations in Central and South Asia to offset US attempts to dominate the energy-rich region. A major component of Russia’s effort to counter Washington is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Founded in 2001, the SCO is co-headed by Russia and China; it includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while India, Iran and Pakistan have observer status. It supports security and economic cooperation, and member states have carried out major military exercises in recent years. In September 2010, the SCO carried out war games in Kazakhstan involving over 5,000 military personnel.

During Zardari’s visit, Medvedev for the first time publicly backed Pakistan’s request to join the SCO. Islamabad’s Chinese allies also support Pakistani membership.

Russia and China favor using the SCO as part of a so-called “regional solution” to the war in Afghanistan, that would see the organization take on a security role in the country in the event of any withdrawal of NATO and US forces.

Such an SCO role would run counter to the entire thrust of US military efforts in Afghanistan and the entire region. The US invaded and occupied Afghanistan to prevent the emergence of any rival power or bloc of nations challenging its authority in Eurasia. Central Asia holds the world’s second-greatest concentration of oil and natural gas after the Middle East and is critical to the global geopolitical equilibrium.

Powers concerned by deepening Russian-Pakistani ties include not only the US, but also India. At the start of Zardari’s visit to Moscow, *The Hindu* wrote: “Russian - Pakistani relations have recently acquired breathtaking dynamics. ... Pakistan has now taken centre stage in Russia’s efforts to play a more active role in Central and South Asia as Moscow braces for the drawdown of US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan.”

Another key element of Zardari’s visit to Russia was the development of economic relations between the two countries. On the last day of his trip, Zardari met Russian business leaders in St. Petersburg, where he largely focused on encouraging Russian investment in Pakistani infrastructure projects.

Addressing business figures in St. Petersburg—which was made a sister city of Pakistan’s commercial capital, Karachi, in honor of the visit—Zardari appealed for investment in the steel industry, new oil and gas pipelines, railways and electricity. “I can open doors for you and it is for the businessmen to take advantage of closer business relations between the two countries,” Zardari said.

The Pakistani president stressed to his business audience that the era of poor Russian-Pakistani relations was over, saying that there was no need to remain “mired in distrust.”



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