

## COMMENT 227 - From Kabul to Kyiv, Pakistan's persistent diplomatic course

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On February 23, Pakistan's Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan arrived in Moscow for a [two-days visit](#). According to open sources, the PM's Russia trip was for a '[exchange of views on major regional and international issues](#)'<sup>1</sup>, aiming at a [reset of bilateral ties and 'expanding cooperation in the energy sector'](#). When opening the discussions, Imran Khan chose a remarkably peculiar statement. Referring to the then current situation, he said: '[What a time I have come, so much excitement](#)'. Putin's "bullying" of the Ukraine reached at that very moment and once again a dramatic peak (after the [illegal annexation](#) of Ukrainian Crimea in 2014). Even before Khan's departure to Moscow it was well-known that Russia is again taking unprovoked, coercive measures against Ukraine. For example, the unacceptable threatening of the Ukrainian government and its people by a massive build-up of forces along the country's borders, or pushing the level of violations to the Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty to new heights. Making the situation worse, just a few hours after Khan's dubious remark, Russia conducted a [full-scale invasion](#) of its neighbor, an independent European country. As such, it does not come by surprise that Khan's appearance in Moscow raised [criticisms](#). Commentators described the first visit by a Pakistani PM to Russia [after 23 years](#) as '[ill-timed](#)' and a step towards further [isolation](#). Additionally, a joint statement was signed by a significant number of [Islamabad-based top-diplomats](#) calling on

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<sup>1</sup> Including Islamophobia and the situation in Afghanistan.

the government of Pakistan ‘to support a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine’.

Considering the actual result of the respective [UNGA voting](#)<sup>2</sup>, it becomes clear that several countries seemed to be overwhelmed by the pace of developments in the Ukraine. Concretely, it appears that some governments are still in the process of working out their official foreign policy approaches -adapting to the actual situation- which would explain some level of undecidedness so far. However, witnessing the rapid escalation of the war at Europe’s Eastern flank, including the larger, global dimension of it, there is an increasing understanding that “wait-and-watch” or even an “open siding” with Putin’s Russia will have severe ramifications.

The latter phenomenon brings the Pakistani case into the forefront, which is undoubtedly with its very own peculiar circumstances, and which calls for a closer observation. Despite the above-mentioned criticisms and diplomatic appeals by the international community - which decided to increase pressure on Putin through economic sanctions and political isolation - Islamabad ignored the latest expressed volition against Russia by the UNGA. Instead, it signed [import deals](#) with Moscow, worth of billions of dollars. Consequently, Pakistan once more actively undermines the interests of Washington, Brussels, and other representatives of the liberal international order (as it did bluntly by supporting the Taliban’s fight against the US, NATO, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan)<sup>3</sup>. By conducting “business as usual” with Russia, Pakistan as a regional power and crucial actor in the Muslim world provides Putin with diplomatic loopholes into, and “economic room” to maneuver within, the international arena. This happens just as most UN member states are planning to narrow - even shut-down – relations with Russia in order to make the Russian dictator remove troops from Ukraine. After their country’s decisive role in the fall of Kabul, the Pakistani leadership now supports Russian pressure on Kyiv and the potential fall of another democratic government.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The resolution to denounce Russia over its invasion of the Ukraine was [supported by 141](#) of the UN General assembly's 193 members.

<sup>3</sup> It is common sense that Pakistan is the main sponsor of the Afghan Taliban. With the military (including training and equipment), logistic, financial, and intelligence support by Pakistan’s security sector agents, the Taliban were able to overthrow the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently, Moscow aims at the installation of a pro-Russian, puppet regime in the Ukraine.

However, it also becomes clear that for Pakistan’s establishment, Khan’s Russian trip is not just about ensuring the supplies of wheat and gas (indeed an extraordinarily essential task, considering the food shortages and level of energy crises in the South Asian nation). The visit was also not only about the construction of an [LNG \(liquefied natural gas\) terminal](#) in the port city of Gwadar and the potential [installment of a new gas pipeline](#) from the coast towards the north-eastern city of Lahore.<sup>5</sup> Here, we find the statement by Ambassador Munir Akram, Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to UN Ambassador, in an interview with *Geo News*, most interesting. Mr. Akram noted that if his country ‘[takes a side in this dispute, it will be unable to enable the warring parties in negotiating and resolving the crisis.](#)’ Obviously encouraged by being a key facilitator of the “[2020 Doha deal](#)” between the Taliban and the US<sup>6</sup>, Pakistan envisions for itself a role as a potential mediator in the Ukraine war. Yet it is argued here that Islamabad’s diplomatic ambitions reach beyond the immediate Russian-Ukrainian nexus. More concretely, it appears that Pakistan wants to establish itself as an interlocutor between the major powers of Russia and China in working out a potential post-war scenario, as well as in the upcoming geopolitical architecture of the Eurasian region. By supporting Putin, Khan and his backing Pakistani security circles are putting their bets on an emerging triangular relation between their country, Russia, and China – as well as on changing relations between New Delhi and Moscow. The latter one must be seen from a Pakistani perspective as a logical continuation of the historically entrenched, two-point foreign policy agenda: the installment of a Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the promotion an anti-India agenda on the international level.

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2015, Russia and Pakistan agreed in principle on the construction of the so-called North-South pipeline. However, this seems to be wishful thinking rather than a serious proposal for a multilateral development project.

<sup>6</sup> The “Doha deal” led to the withdrawal of US troops from and the end of NATO’s Resolute Support Mission/RSM in Afghanistan. The latter agreement is perceived by Islamabad as a major achievement and major diplomatic success.

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