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REINVIGORATING PAKISTAN-BELARUS PARTNERSHIP WITH A PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK

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The paper focuses on the political and economic relations between Pakistan and Belarus who celebrated their 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations in the last few years. The diplomatic framework has helped lay a legal basis to stimulate the economic relationship of the two countries. It shows how imperative is forging a political relationship between states to stimulate and lay a foundation for economic cooperation. The research is analytical and exploratory.

Keywords: cooperation; economic partnership; diplomatic framework; regional integration; stability.

Pakistan and Belarus relations date back after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Belarus became independent in 1991. Both countries were able to establish diplomatic relations on 3rd February 1994. For the following two decades, the relations stayed limited. The diplomatic relations got pace in 2015 with meetings between the leadership of both states. These meetings were able to lay the foundation for the enhancement of bilateral relations. The first sign of enhancing these bilateral relations was in July 2014 with the opening of the Belarusian embassy in Pakistan. Belarus reciprocated the same by opening Pakistan's embassy in August 2015. The representatives in each country helped in stimulating the cooperation in recent years.

Official visits commenced when Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko visited Pakistan in May 2015. Later that year, in August, the Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif then visited Minsk. Other high official visits included in November 2015 of former Belarusian Prime Minister Andrei Kobyakov. More interactions included President Lukashenko meeting with former President Mamnoon Hussain in Istanbul on the side-lines of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in April 2016.

There were also interactions during other international forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2019 in Bishkek between

President Lukashenko and Prime Minister Imran Khan. There has also been direct communication between the parliaments of both countries and more direct visits involving parliamentary delegations since 2017. The parliaments have also created friendship groups to enhance communication and facilitate cooperation between the two countries.

These direct high official visits have resulted in over 80 Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs), documents, protocols, declarations, and agreements between the two countries that cover cooperation in various areas, including economic activities. The direct contact between the leaders of both countries has cemented the bilateral ties and has shown that conducive political cooperation can further enhance. On 29 May 2015, the Islamabad Declaration of Pakistan-Belarus Partnership was signed to further develop the multifaceted cooperation between the two countries. This cooperation was further forged by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Pakistan and Belarus on 10 August 2015.

Both countries also cooperate on international forums while focussing on pressing issues impacting regional and global arenas. This interaction is made effective through a permanent mechanism that functions through political consultations between high officials like the foreign ministers of both countries.

Foreign Policy Objectives: Gauging Potential

While examining the essential characteristics of the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Belarus, it can be said that they are based on all-inclusive economic cooperation [1]. Both countries also have pursued closer business-to-business interactions within the private and public sector's parameters.

Pakistan and Belarus have also supported each other diplomatically in several international forums. Both have focused on several different avenues of cooperation, including strategic-defence collaboration, focusing on advancing inter-regional cooperation. All this would not be possible without a strong, broad, and all-inclusive legal framework of cooperation following that economic cooperation.

Further to put these institutional mechanisms into developing constructive economic ties, Pakistan-Belarus Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation was also created in 2015 and has held five sessions. High officials from their respective governments have headed it with Abdul Razak Dawood, Advisor to Prime Minister on Commerce, Textiles, Industry-Production, and Viktor Karankevich, Minister of Energy. The formation of Joint Working Groups (JWG) focuses on areas such as Industrial Cooperation, Agriculture Cooperation, and Science and Technology. Two sessions of Joint Working Group on Industrial Cooperation, four on Agricultural Cooperation and three on Cooperation in Science and Technology, have been held between the two states.

There are also several forums to enable and institutionalize close cooperation and collaboration between the two countries business communities.

These include the Pak-Belarus Business and Investment Forum, Pak-Belarus Textile Forum, Pak-Belarus Agricultural Forum, and the Pak-Belarus Joint Business Council.

The bilateral trade turnover between Pakistan and Belarus as of 2019 has been about \$50.2 million, with exports being about \$15.1 million from Pakistan and imports from Belarus were about \$35.1 million, showing a trade surplus of \$20 million for Belarus [1]. Even during in the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic cooperation between the two countries stayed steady due to the mechanisms under place, with a trade turnover of about \$52 million. Belarus exports being about \$37 million and Pakistan's exports being about \$15 million.

Belarus exports agricultural-related machinery like tractors, and food products, while Pakistan exports include basmati rice, fruits and vegetables, leather goods, and textiles. [2]. There have also been joint military cooperation and sessions between officials as both states have vital interests in enhancing cooperation in the defensive field.

Enhancing a Progressive Political and Economic Framework

It has been witnessed that the political interaction between the two countries has enhanced a legal framework that is laid out to forge stronger economic ties further. The economic trade turnover has been progressive for both countries.

Both states need to continue exchanging high-level visits regularly and also provide grounds for academic growth. The current mechanism by the Bilateral Political Consultations between the foreign ministries of Pakistan and Belarus needs to continue its regular sessions to find ways to forge stronger ties. To increase cooperation in every field, both countries must use the mechanism provided by the Inter-Parliamentary and Inter-Regional Cooperation.

Besides the political framework, the economic aspect also can be further strengthened between the two countries. The economic trade turnover is productive. However, there is still huge untapped potential between both nations, mainly to integrate with the broader Eurasian region. Both countries need to focus on result-oriented economic cooperation and collaboration.

Each country's Commerce Councils communicate should find conducive ways to enhance people-to-people contacts, communication, and cooperation between the business communities of each country. The bilateral political consultations have already laid out a basis for the economic cooperation between the two states. In this regard, the Joint Economic Commissions can create a forum for more broader economic cooperation beyond the current trading guidelines and products.

There is room for increasing exports from Pakistan and Belarus to expand beyond joint ventures between companies. The idea of direct marketing and

participation in international trade exhibitions can get first-hand knowledge and opportunity to engage regionally.

Pakistan and Belarus can also work towards building inter-regional cooperation and collaboration through bilateral and multilateral channels. A clear example is the fact that both countries are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and have megaprojects associated with this economic project. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park are connected under the Belt & Road Initiative.

Therefore, in the long term, it can create connectivity beyond borders. Belarus is a vital hub in the Eurasian region, while Pakistan has a strategic position in South Asia, connecting it to the Middle East, Indian Ocean, and the Far East Asian countries. Thereby, there are many opportunities to reinvigorate and stimulate economic and political partnerships and enhance regional cooperation.

In this aspect, the soft components include harmonization and coordination of cross-border policies. For example, establishing legal and regulatory frameworks for trade activities, custom-tariff policies, border clearance, cultural exchanges, academic cooperation, tourism, etc. The strategic objective of connectivity must be the expansion of trade and exploring joint avenues of cooperation. The regional economic cooperation appears to have reduced the income gaps between countries because of convergence and common grounds.

Regional integration helps countries to overcome gaps, division, and challenges. In this aspect, academic/intellectual institutional development, and facilitation are significant in recent times. A common framework for education policy and practice will help to foster collaboration and hasten progress towards regional convergence.

A legal basis for the framework of cooperation has been facilitated through signing various legal documents and agreements. Economic cooperation between the two states has been productive with regular interactions between the officials. In this context, operationalization of practical policy options could pave the way for new avenues of economic cooperation, political integration, harmony, peaceful coexistence, respect, and lead towards a multilateral regional alliance to an unprecedented level.

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