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## **RUSSIA CHANGING THE SIGNPOSTS IN PAKISTAN**

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First, a Russian military delegation made a rare visit to Pakistan's lawless tribal areas.

Then Russian-language signposts were erected on roads in the northwestern province of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa.

Now, Moscow has appointed an honorary consul in the city of Peshawar.

These unprecedented moves appear to be part of a significant upturn in ties between Russia and Pakistan, former Cold War foes.

During the Soviet Union's decade-long occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-89, Pakistan helped the United States funnel weapons and fighters to help the mujahedin battling Soviet forces.

Eyebrows were raised in March 2017 when a group of Russian military advisers were given a rare tour of the North Waziristan tribal region, a no-go area for the media and a former hotbed of militancy. That came just months after Russia and Pakistan conducted joint military drills for the first time.

Around that time, new signposts in Russian appeared in North Waziristan. Previously, traffic signs were only in Urdu, the official language, and Pashto, spoken by the majority of Pashtuns in the area.

Weeks later, Russia appointed Arsala Khan as honorary consul-general in Peshawar at a ceremony

on February 20. The provincial governor, Iqbal Zafar Jhagra, said it signaled a "new chapter" of renewed diplomatic relations.

Russia's creeping footprint in Pakistan has come amid renewed interest in neighboring Afghanistan.

It has also come at a time when U.S.-Pakistani relations are spiraling downward over Pakistan's reputed support for the Afghan Taliban.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said during a press conference in Moscow with his Pakistan counterpart Khawaja Muhammad Asif on February 20 that Moscow was "very preoccupied" by the increasing presence of Islamic State (IS) militants in Afghanistan and the threat the group poses to the Central Asian republics and Russia.

Afghan officials have accused Moscow of visiting Taliban training centers in Pakistan and supporting the group.

The United States has suggested that Russia may be providing weapons to the Taliban, which enjoys sanctuaries in Pakistan.

Russia denies that it provides any such support to the Taliban, although it admitted it has had contact with the militant group over safeguarding security and getting the militants to reconcile with Kabul.

Russia also has also offered to host talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and has suggested easing global sanctions against Taliban leaders who cooperate with peace efforts.

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