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**Breaking the deadlocks**

The last week of March saw some interesting developments regarding trade between India and Pakistan. First, the PTI-led government showed some willingness to resume bilateral trade and then in a quick about-turn reneged on its initial announcement when PM Imran Khan took yet another U-turn which has now become a hallmark of his politics.

We need to see the trade relations between India and Pakistan in a much broader perspective of some geopolitical realities of this entire region. There are many players which affect each other to gain their own immediate advantages and by doing so they put all prospects of peace in danger. There is not only one deadlock between India and Pakistan; there are multiple deadlocks that we need to look at before we try to break them for enhanced trade relations in the Subcontinent as well as from Central Asia to South Asia.

The first deadlock is in Afghanistan which has been a victim of a continued civil war for at least 40 years now. Though countries such as America, Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union all played their roles in the 1980s, afterwards it was essentially the Afghan warlords that in the 1990s created a prolonged deadlock resulting in the Pakistan-supported Taliban takeover in Kabul in 1996. The anachronistic and brutal rule of the Taliban led to another invasion in 2001. For the past 20 years, American-supported governments have been ruling in Kabul.

Now it is only the Kabul government and the Taliban which can break the deadlock by reaching a power-sharing formula. The Ghani government in Kabul considers itself an elected and legitimate dispensation that has a right to rule in the country. The Taliban keep targeting both civilian and military locations, making it difficult for any conclusion that is acceptable to the parties involved. If all the concerned players are able to break the deadlock in Afghanistan, that will greatly help in improved trade relations from Central Asia to South Asia.

The second deadlock is between China and India. Relations between India and Pakistan now depend to a great extent on how China and India relate to each other. With India China has had long-standing disputes that both countries have been unable to resolve despite their pronouncements for peace. As long as China does not have good relations with India, it appears to be in China’s interest that India and Pakistan too remain in conflict. A peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue will enable India to be more focused and emerge more powerful on its northern borders with China. This China-India deadlock is a major hurdle between India-Pakistan trade relations which perhaps will not be normal unless the two bigger neighbours resolve their issues.

The third deadlock in this region emanates from India. The jingoistic and Hindu nationalist government of the BJP led by a criminal like Modi has both internally and externally endangered harmony and peace. Of course, the most enduring deadlock is about Kashmir. Rather than trying to solve it with active engagement of the Kashmiri people, India’s neighbours and regional powers, PM Modi has aggravated the deadlock by an illegal and unconstitutional announcement of annexation of Jammu and Kashmir into India. He has pandered to the religious right within Indian society to garner political support.

Modi has also tried to bully India’s neighbours and has been aspiring to be a major military power equal to China. The BJP government’s new-found bonhomie with the US has estranged it further from China. Then there is the Indian tendency to use Afghanistan as a battleground of a proxy war against Pakistan by using Afghan soil against Pakistan; this disturbs regional peace and prevents bilateral and multilateral trade in the region.

Iran is the locale of the fourth deadlock in this region. Presidents Muhammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani both tried to loosen the shackles of conservatism and militarism in Iran but in vain. Iran’s pursuit of its missile and nuclear programmes has prolonged the deadlock. Iran’s now closer ties with China make it an even more unlikeable state for both America and India. The closer China comes to Iran, the more unlikely Iran is to have good relations with either America or India. To break the deadlock, Iran needs a fundamental alteration in its military, political and religious policies which are so intertwined there. With America and Saudi Arabia as its counterfoils in the region, Iran can hardly afford to antagonize India too.

Finally, we come to Pakistan’ contributions to the deadlocks in this region. Though Kashmir was an issue right from 1947, there was no deadlock in trade and other relations with India. The war in 1965 did the most harm to bilateral relations and resulted in a complete breakdown in connections. Then General Ziaul Haq’s misadventure in Afghanistan did prolong his own rule for eleven years but did tremendous harm to peace in this region.

To break the deadlocks, Pakistan also needs a sea change in its policies especially toward Afghanistan and India. Two words of advice for Pakistan to understand: the Taliban are on the wrong side of history trying to establish a theocracy in the 21st century; and the people of Pakistan have suffered a lot and we cannot expect our people to keep sacrificing their basic needs at the altar of a lofty agenda.

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