**Marrying risk averse with opportunistic**

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With the Taliban ascendant in Afghanistan, the Daesh terrorist network resurgent across Afghanistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist group attacking Pakistani soldiers on a weekly basis, and all kinds of nonsense peddled online, on the airwaves and in print every second of every day, to say we live in dangerous times is an understatement. The big question is: why? What is the actual danger?

If you are an Afghan woman, indeed if you are a woman anywhere, there is active and real danger in simply being. If you live in any of the border districts on any of the Pakistani frontiers, there is grave danger – to the east lies a nation run by right wing religious zealots keen to engage in war to continue to hoodwink their people into a grand civilisational conflict. To the west lie two nations, now both run by right-wing religious zealots that are, by definition, expansionist. Both have such deep roots in Pakistani society that what happens in either also happens to Pakistanis, whether the fantasy fiction weavers in government or the media like to admit it or not. Danger is ever present for the Pakistani cop, soldier, spy, seaman or airman – with constantly metastasizing terrorist threats since 2007. There is danger everywhere.

The mind of the meek examines the landscape to assess danger and bases strategic decisions, tactical choices, and operational pathways in accordance with the ambition that consumes the meek: the avoidance of danger. The mind of the bold does things a little differently. Instead of being defined by the dangers and risks that shape the environment, the bold and the mighty decide on their strategic, tactical and operational direction based on opportunity. Wisdom is rarely, if ever, in the binary. So the key challenge, from the individual (the lowest form of social organisation), to the state (the highest form that has existed thus far) is to establish an ambitious but wise equilibrium between danger, and opportunity.

The American cold front that Prime Minister Imran Khan currently faces, is the product of a number of things – but there is one factor that is overused in explaining why the Biden Administration is treating Pakistan with a distant derision, and one factor that is barely mentioned. Pakistan’s so-called double game, its seeming enthusiasm for the Taliban ascendancy, and the old Admiral Mike Mullen line from 2011 are used to explain why Obama-era veterans are so angry and bitter at Pakistan. All of these are important factors in informing the baseline approaches of several key senior officials in the Biden Administration – but they are neither singular, nor sufficient in explaining the current US attitude to Pakistan.

The less explored, and I would argue more crucial, factor in the American cold shoulder for Pakistan is its strategic competition with China. China is the defining foreign policy and national security driver in Washington DC – and there is really no alternative voice or version of the US strategic posture that can compete with the American competition with China.

Now, leaving aside the wisdom of the US strategic competition with China – the question for Pakistan is whether it wants to be the meek country that analyses this defining global cleavage as a source of risk and danger, or whether it wants to be the bold, strong nation that identifies and takes advantage of the opportunities that this global cleavage creates. As always, the wisest course will be the uncomfortable and awkward marriage between an incessantly opportunistic Pakistan and one that wisely adopts a risk-averse posture when needed.

Pakistan has been a victim of its own defensive crouch now for over two decades. It began in the autumn of 1998 and grew into the Kargil fiasco – and ever since then, exacerbated by the military takeover of 1999, the September 11 attacks of 2001, and the Mumbai attacks of 2008 – Pakistan is held to account for the worst things attributed to it, and thus has become incapable of talking about its best attributes and behaviours. The fact that Pakistani officialdom is flummoxed by the US cold shoulder is the latest evidence of an inability of the ossified national security and foreign policy infrastructure to operate in the 21st century – where the only constant is change.

Some ground rules for how Pakistan must play the opportunities game? First, remember that for Americans, there are “no permanent friends or enemies, only interests”. The outrage in France over its cancelled submarine deal with Australia merits its own detailed analysis – but the short lesson for Pakistan is simple. If the US can ambush a close Nato ally, imbued with the correct pigmentation, and righteous Judeo-Christian heritage, like France, it can do a lot worse to Pakistan. And it will. But it also means that if Pakistan is integral to US interests, it would not be ignored or side-lined in the manner Pakistan’s enemies would like it to be.

Second, there are substantial differences in how Washington DC views strategic competition with China, and how many US allies – including nearly all of ‘old Europe’, most of new Europe, and the full spectrum of Southeast Asian nations – view this competition. It is possible to live outside the binaries that Washington DC (and to a lesser but equally important extent Beijing) want other countries to live in.

The most recent ‘strategic’ evidence of this is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership – a fifteen country trade agreement driven by China. Most of its members are key American allies in the Indo Pacific region. The RCEP is proof that countries, including middle powers, can have their cake and eat it too. And the best advocate of this principle? None other than China, which applied last week to join the CPTPP, the residual Pacific alliance that was originally designed as an anti China alliance by the same Obama era veterans whose uncompromising genius informs President Biden’s ignore Pakistan approach.

Third, not everything that Pakistan does should be informed by what India is doing – but a lot more should be informed by what India is DOING, rather than what India is saying. Indian strategists have mastered the ability to provoke Pakistan’s national discourse. Iran, Tajikistan, and even post-Ghani Afghanistan are all proof of the immense reach of Indian strategic communications. But what India (or its proxies, from Tehran to Canberra) says is less material than what India does: trade, defence and domestic policy. Eschewing the momentary bliss of reacting to Indian provocations, from Kashmir to Kandahar, and focusing on India’s actual capacity to damage Pakistani interests will uncover much more opportunity than what Pakistani strategists are used to.

Fourth, Pakistani earnestness needs to give way to Pakistani profiteering. The expectation that countries will bend to the will of Pakistan’s leaders simply because Pakistan has tried to do the right thing in Afghanistan the last two years reeks of naivete and simplicity (and those are the kindest words one can use there). Without robust commercial relationships, other countries have limited interest in Pakistan’s ‘narrative’ or its ‘soft power’ or its ‘messages’.

Narratives are shaped by money – and in 2021 and for many years to come, Pakistan is poised to be a magnet for smart money. Venture capitalists aren’t stupid. They aren’t investing in Pakistan because photoshopped and airbrushed Instagram photos of mountains have made them weep with longing. They are investing because there is money here. When confronted by sceptical ‘allies’, Pakistan needs to show them the money.

Finally, some food for thought. One of the fifteen Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership countries? New Zealand. Pakistan’s total trade with New Zealand? $127 million. New Zealand’s total trade with India? Over $1.7 billion. Happy outraging.

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