**Power Blocs Flexing Their Muscles**

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Those of us who have been around long enough would recollect the hijacking of an Indian aircraft “Ganga” in January 1971. A Fokker Friendship F27; was one of the oldest planes in the Indian Airlines fleet. It was decommissioned due to age and re-inducted days before the hijacking. It was a short hop from Srinagar to Jammu with 32 passengers. The hijackers claimed to be Kashmiri separatists of the National Liberation Front. They released the passengers and crew and burnt the aircraft.

It was headline news all around, creating a huge buzz. I recollect visiting the site with a delegation as the president of Punjab University Students Union. It turned out to be a huge ruse enacted by the Indian intelligence services. The manipulation was to create a raison d’etre, a justification to ban flights of Pakistani aeroplanes over Indian Territory. It was orchestrated during the run-up to the 1971 war between the two countries. It severely hampered troop movement to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The alternate route of flying via Sri Lanka or the use of ships around the tip of the Sub-Continent was time-consuming and extremely expensive.

Something similar occurred in the Cricket series between New Zealand and Pakistan. A terror alert originating in India, camouflaged through proxies, was used as a pretext to cancel the cricketing event on the start date. The New Zealand team was already in the country travelling between Islamabad and Rawalpindi regularly to practice. Their security was top-notch, as seen on social media. Efforts at the highest levels to prevent this debacle failed. New Zealand cricketing board, an autonomous body, was to blame according to “big wigs.”

There was a repeat within days by the British Cricketing Board cancelling their teams’ visit. The British High Commissioner in a TV interview went to great lengths to distance the UK Government’s involvement in this cancellation. It is the ugly face of Cricket Diplomacy. The reason given was the discomfort of English players “fearing their safety.” The basis was a false alarm arising out of a fictitious terror alert. It was dollars at play. Some of the players who expressed “discomfort” are part of the Indian Premier League, where they rake in millions every season. A nudge from the paymasters could have triggered their reaction.

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Depriving millions of ardent cricketing fans a chance to enjoy their favourite players in action is just the beginning. A squeeze on Pakistan is the ultimate objective that is triggering such events. Certainly, those who have stewardship of our nation realize the dangerous waters we have to navigate. We have to be cognizant of the fact that the US may have turned its back on Afghanistan, but has not left the area. It is a strategic withdrawal to regroup and refocus on a larger issue: the spread of China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific arena.

Strategic alliances and power blocs are in place to pursue this agenda. The latest being “AUKUS,” a special purpose vehicle designed to facilitate the transfer of nuclear technology to Australia by the US and the UK. It is to enable Australia to build and operate nuclear-powered submarines. China has one of the largest naval forces. To counter their capability, these submarines will be deployed to patrol the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea and adjoining areas. A nuclear submarine is quieter than diesel-fired engines and can operate for long periods without surfacing. The Strait of Malacca is one of the four chokepoints in maritime passages that can obstruct cross-continental traffic. The other three are Panama, Suez and Arabian Gulf.

“AUKUS” adds one more tier to multiple other blocs already in existence. There is “QUAD” that includes the US, India, Japan and Australia; “ANZAC” with New Zealand, Australia and the US; ” 5 I Alliance” an intelligence-sharing arrangement between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, the US and the list goes on. These are, definitely, not social clubs, but layers put together to control the Ocean and Seas surrounding East Asia and the Pacific. What is their focus? Containment of China.

How does it impact Pakistan? Containment requires full encirclement. Dominating the waters covers the eastern flank. As a willing participant in this effort, India covers the Southern border. Frozen North is not in play. That leaves South West and the Western borders. Russian-China shared borders on the West are inhospitable for trade routes. That brings Pakistan to the front and centre of this new “Great Game” between world powers.

The CPEC corridor provides China with the shortest access to warm waters to facilitate its massive trade, shaving weeks off shipping time. It also provides the framework to expand the “Road and Belt Initiative” to extend westwards through Afghanistan linking China to the Middle East and European markets.

After withdrawal from the Afghan conflict, the Western alliance finds it imperative to bring back the days of subservient Pakistan as in yesteryears. That is not happening under PM IK. Hence, every effort will be made to apply a squeeze both internally and externally.

Furthermore, the new Afghan government is trying to find its feet. Taliban have to walk a narrow path. On one hand, they have to placate forces who seek an inclusive Government, female participation and prevent terrorist groups from operating. On the other hand, they have to deal with hardliners pushing for spoils of war and authoritarian control. The next few months are crucial. Let us hope for the best.

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