[**The Russia visit**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1677139/the-russia-visit)

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PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan jetting off to Russia as an attack on Ukraine was imminent wasn’t a good look for Pakistan internationally. Proponents of the visit argue that Pakistan deserves an independent foreign policy and that Pakistan’s alliance with the US has brought its own share of problems.

Ideally, every country should have an independent foreign policy. In reality, it doesn’t quite pan out that way. Economic considerations often lie at the heart of foreign policy formulation. For Pakistan, being in the ‘American camp’ meant large inflows of economic assistance and military aid.

Despite Western military might and economic clout however, the Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been tempered by considerations of skyrocketing energy bills. After all, Russia provides about 10 per cent of the world’s oil supplies and one-third of Europe’s gas. As the Qatari energy minister wisely said, “No other country can flood the market with that kind of volume.”

President Putin knows this and surely must have factored this in prior to attacking his neighbour. Yet Russia now faces economic sanctions and pariah status, not just from the US and EU, but also Japan. The Americans have never shied away from financially punishing countries they deem are taking actions contrary to their interests. The recent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, characterised by Imran Khan as “breaking the shackles of slavery” nevertheless led to the US freezing Afghan assets and punishing the Afghan economy in the harshest manner.

Nothing has been gained from the Moscow trip.

As the leader of a powerful Western bloc, the US has also been able to rely on multilateral agreements and bodies such as Nato and the UN to back up its position and rally its allies to its defence. Despite its strong reliance on Russian energy, Germany halted plans for a key Russian pipeline and joined the US in sanctioning Russian companies and oligarchs.

In that backdrop, what purpose did the Russian visit serve for Pakistan? In their three-and-a-half-hour meeting, President Putin may have asked Prime Minister Khan to support Russia’s actions in Ukraine, but he cannot do that. Not only because Pakistan cannot support an invasion being sanctioned by the West but also because Pakistan has a decent relationship with Ukraine and imports much of its wheat from there.

Imran Khan may have asked Putin to help in Afghanistan or make a statement on Kashmir, but having started a war in Ukraine, he is in no position to address Afghanistan. India moreover has historically had much stronger ties with Russia. Pakistan, in fact, could have used India’s reluctance to condemn Russian aggression (being viewed negatively in the West) as a cautionary tale to the West, warning it of India’s unreliability as a Quad partner. But unfortunately our foreign policy gurus seem to have other ideas. That leaves the much-touted energy discussion. Well, that’s a non-starter with the sanctions going into effect.

Although nothing has been gained from the visit, it has, in Western capitals, reaffirmed the view that Pakistan’s foreign policy is adrift. Surely, Prime Minister Khan and his advisers must be aware that, with the exception of China, Pakistan’s main trading partners are the US and European countries. They must also know that Pakistan’s FATF listing and GSP-Plus status is determined largely by Western powers. And yet, there seems to be an incomprehensible drive by the current hybrid set-up to alienate Pakistan from the West.

Starting with his speech to the UNGA in September 2019, Prime Minister Khan has hardly let go of an opportunity to decry Isla­mophobia in the West. This leads many Western journalists to question him on the treatment of Uighurs in China. When he dismisses that as a problem, it gives the impression that Pakistan is willing to overlook Chinese excesses but is overly focused on critiquing the West.

Unlike with Russia, Pakistan has historic ties with China, which are in its interest to maintain but being overly critical of Western countries, simply because they are democracies and more tolerant of criticism, while remaining entirely accepting of others because they are autocracies and don’t take kindly to criticism, isn’t neutrality. It’s picking a side.

This is bizarre policy because the size of the Pakistani diaspora in the West is far greater than in China or Russia. Pakistani policymakers, both civilian and military, aspire for Western nationalities for their children, park their money in Western banks, buy real estate in London and trust Pfizer over Sinopharm or Sputnik.

This new-found fascination with exploring options to the Western bloc needs to be backed up with the same kind of enthusiasm in pursuing China or Russia as alternative destinations for their money and children, else these alliances will be unsustainable and all too vulnerable to threats of visa denials and economic sanctions from the West.

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