**Is it Time to Take Sides?**

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Global power politics has taken a new and challenging direction. With the US exit from Afghanistan, the American leaders have apparently diverted all their resources to the containment of China as well as the potential challenge of multipolarity that has been in offing for some years and being precipitated by the evolving geopolitical and geo-strategic situation in the Southwest Asia and the Asia Pacific. While the AUKUS represents the intensifying “China containment” in the Asia Pacific, the US policy to keep the new rulers of Afghanistan and their empathizers on tenterhooks could be the harbinger of a new dangerously destabilising phenomenon in this region and beyond.

The developing states of greater Asia have been viewing the evolving strategic conflicts between two great powers with trepidation, which have the potential of being sucked in even if they choose to remain neutral in their foreign and security policies. This situation poses more serious challenges to the countries bordering Afghanistan or situated in close vicinity of that unstable country. These states have to review their foreign and security policy options within the evolving US policy in the region. Pakistan figures prominently among these states. Hamstrung between a hostile neighbour on the east and an uncertain situation on the west, Pakistan has to walk a tight rope.

Foreign policy options for Pakistan in the coming decade need to be reviewed in the backdrop of the intensifying US competition and confrontation with China. The US-led Western states, after humiliation in Afghanistan, launched a poisonous campaign to hold Pakistan responsible for the Taliban’s cakewalk to Kabul. This is now followed by a bill moved by 22 Republican Senators for reprisals against Pakistan for its role in the Afghanistan debacle. Pakistan, in the past, has been accused of duplicity and playing a double game with President Donald Trump foul-mouthing in the harshest language against it. The US anger owes a great deal to Pakistan’s partnership with China in the BRI than keeping lines of communication with the Taliban open or the fall of Kabul.

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The chessboard of realignment, non-alignment and appeasement by states commensurate with their national interests was laid by President Obama’s “pivot to Asia” policy given impetus by China’s dizzying economic development, the strident expansion of trade and investment in many continents after joining the WTO and its emergence as the second-largest economy of the world surpassing the US in purchasing power parity, and BRI. Pakistan being the host of the flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has since remained under the microscopic scrutiny of the US leaders. From the outset, the US leaders have been hand in glove with India to oppose this economic corridor. Now, its likely expansion to Afghanistan and Central Asia has become an added concern for them.

The US tilt to India and its hostility towards China and Pakistan were reflected by multiple US moves. Obama administration signed Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreements with Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and recognised India as a “Major Defence Partner” in June 2015. This entitled India for strategic as well as technological support of the US in the region and elsewhere. For the first time since World War II, Japan was allowed to enhance its military capability for a role in the Quad.

In a bid to wean the ASEAN away from China, the US assured their Defence Minister in September 2016 that it would play equally important roles from the sea, air and underwater with its robust military presence more geographically distributed, operationally robust and politically sustainable. While conducting missile attack warning exercises with Japan, South Korea separately, the US has since held a series of naval exercises with Quad states. Now, the NATO warships have been moved close to the South China Sea.

All these moves mirrored a well-thought-out policy towards China and India. This was the time our leadership should have reviewed our foreign and security policy in the backdrop of the evolving competition and confrontation between the US and China that would clearly dominate the international landscape in the coming decades. Pakistan faces this challenge on multiple counts including its determined partnership with China, misconstrued role in the fall of Kabul, misplaced Western apprehensions for the safety of its nukes and the relentless Indian campaign to stigmatize it as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Pakistan really finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. It cannot sacrifice its tried and tested friendship with China, and ill afford to incur the hostility of the sole superpower too. We have lost precious years to see the implications of the US policy, build our capacity to pursue an independent foreign and security policy. Our irony is that we have all along been dependent on foreign debt and foreign economic aid. We cannot take sides like our eastern neighbour nor can we afford to have an India-centric foreign policy anymore.

We are economically weak and politically and ideologically divided. We are too dependent on international financial institutions with backbreaking debts. Our exports are not matching our ever-increasing import bill despite many an incentive to the manufacturing sector. We have fallen from our erstwhile food self-sufficiency status to a food importing country. Our aristocrats are unwilling to loosen their grip on state resources and relent in their acquisitive exploits. Our eastern neighbour with the connivance of the West would like to see us bogged down in the quagmire of FATF.

What is the way forward? We should take a lesson from the playbook of China – evolving a policy of restraint in international disputes. We take recourse to the Parliament to debate our challenges and opportunities in the evolving situation. While preserving our friendship with China and seeking a normal relationship with the US, we should concentrate on addressing in earnest our economic weaknesses and political and ideological fault lines. We should address our foreign policy challenges by rigorous but quiet diplomacy without indulging in angry and offensive rhetoric. Here lies our survival.

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