**New Chapter in Pak-Russia Ties**

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Prime Minister Imran Khan is all set to start his visit to Moscow from Wednesday, February 23 which is marked as the Defenders of Fatherland Day. It is celebrated as the armed forces and founding day of the Red Army in Russia, Turkmenistan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. We shall wish a great day to all the natives of the countries celebrating the day world over. Best of luck to Prime Minister Khan too for his very ambitious visit that Pakistan’s foreign office has termed as ‘landmark’ last Friday without disclosing its itinerary and agenda.

Starting on February 23, this would be the first official visit to Moscow by an elected prime minister of Pakistan after 23 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin has invited Pakistan’s Prime Minister who had been anxiously waiting for the US President’s phone call. Ice had melted between the countries, two poles apart, in early 1999 when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had a very cordial visit to Russia. But, bilateral terms could not go beyond aspirations. The time proved the disapproval of the visit by pro-US elements in Pakistan that led to the undemocratic move on October 12, 1999. Later, the army revolt proved to be a prelude to the bow down to the US phone call in 2011. The four decades in a row were the worst for the entire world, especially for Pakistan and the region too.

The melting ice between Russia and Pakistan may be afresh beginning at a time when the situation is rapidly changing in the region. Seems like a better restart between the two cold war rivals. Given all the countries at the table have learnt from past mistakes, the new beginning may turn around the destiny of the countries at an individual level, and the region altogether. Standing up together against the economic meltdown, strategic and health pandemics is a must at the moment.

Regional peace and security, gas pipeline projects and bilateral trade and economic initiatives are said to be among the priority agenda for Russo-Pak ties. Recently, Russia has taken many vigorous measures for stronger ties with the countries in the region. However, the US, Nato and EU fiddling in Ukraine against the pro-Russian elements have escalated the conflict between the Washington-leaning government in Ukraine and neighbouring Russia. The objective seems to be blocking Russia from reaching the Black Sea. Russia can find another trade route if Pakistan and Russia could come to terms.

Afghanistan is another spring point in the region. No country is getting on to help the Taliban government with the challenges being faced by the natives. The abrupt withdrawal has left the country in lurk for the funds to pay off the bills. Early this month, the US allowed the international banks to transfer money to Afghanistan for humanitarian purposes. The aid groups were allowed to pay teachers and healthcare workers at state-run institutions without fear of breaching sanctions on the Taliban. Recently, the US has announced to use $7bn in frozen Afghan assets to compensate victims of the 9/11 attacks and for the relief efforts. Might is right. Anxiety looming over the resource-starved country. Hunger and health crisis is hitting millions of children and infants in Afghanistan. Starving the poor could not attract justice. Will Pakistan, Russia and other neighbouring countries be able to challenge the injustice of the mighty power? A Taliban spokesman has condemned the move, calling it “theft” and a sign of “moral decay”.

Internal and external, all eyes are on the visit. Political pundits in Pakistan are terming the visit a sign of the country’s major strategic shift. The Russo-Pak stronger ties may turn around the geopolitical situation in the region. Will Pakistan be able to handle the rowdy Taliban to get them for regional peace negotiations with the ones that created the chaos? The change on this route much depends on the Taliban factor.

The US and its aides, Nato, and EU will be keenly observing the visit in the context of Ukraine and Afghanistan. Being the US proxy in the new cold war against China, India will be closely monitoring the visit of China’s best buddy. Having New Delhi in a long-term strategic partnership with Moscow will be more anxious and conscious about the Russo-Pak dealings on the cards. India will certainly be anxious to see the result of inching closer to the US in recent years. Meanwhile, Russia has also made moves to improve ties with Pakistan. Undoubtedly, the strategic landscape is about to change for Pakistan – one of the key players on this side of the map.

The process of rapprochement began in early 1999 by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and was strengthened during the later years of Musharraf. The process picked up pace in 2011 when Pakistan’s relationship with the US went haywire. At that time, Pakistan decided to diversify its foreign policy options and reach out to Russia. All hope the visit will wipe off the bitter past and lead to a cordial and friendly future on bilateral win-win, collective efforts and collaboration for the region. Both countries along with others have seen the brunt of cold wars and hot pursuits in the region. So, they would be more than willing to stay away from any new one, and strongly support stopping such sorts.

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