**PM IK in Moscow; convergence of interests enabling paradigm shift**

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PM Imran Khan’s visit to Russia was very significant and historic as this was the first bilateral visit of such a stature in almost 23 years. The reality check reveals that both countries have been in opposing modes for the better part of their bilateral history, predominantly due to Pakistan’s tilt towards the US-led West and Russia’s hug to India. There were irritants, mistrust and divergence of interests within but the spoilers in the region and across the Pacific-cum-Atlantic made the gulf so wide that it took almost 23 years to fill in. Given the evolving world power mosaic and Chinese push, the truth is that PM’s personality, clear direction and policy has been pivotal in making the visit a reality.
The invite from President Putin clearly reflects his SWAT analysis leading to the realisation of a need to change posture and connect as per the dictates of the evolving geo-political environment. It also lessons that there are no permanent friends or foes, but state’s interests decide which side of the coin is on the top. Though the desire and intent was there on both sides, this trip is likely to be the most consequential bilateral event not only for both sides but for the region and globe. Given the historical baggage and strangulation around Pakistan, the US-led West was found alarmed but active to scuttle or down play the trip through well integrated media maneuvers optimally exploiting all assets within and abroad. The unprecedented protocol around reflects the warmth the Russians expressed towards the PM and Pakistan.
In the most deep-dyed diplomatic tone, there have been numerous irritants in the past that have obstructed Pak-Russia bilateral relations. Travel of history of both states reveals that they have been in opposing blocs ever since CEATO and CENTO. Pakistan has historically remained loyal to the US and the West. Trashing the engineered western lenses, a dispassionate analysis reveals that this so called friendship has caused prodigious losses to Pakistan. No country has caused such enormous losses to its own state and society while serving the others across Pacific and Atlantic. Pakistan was simply taken as a pliant and proxy state for furthering their vested interests. Whenever our national interests were challenged, we were repeatedly dodged and even checkmated by the West.
Travel through history reveals that the Pak-US relationship has always been transactional and this path is still subsisting. Pakistan has been used, abused and left in the dust countless times. Its wings have been clipped by the slapping of one sanction after the other; Symington in 1977, Pressler Amendment in 1985, Glenn in 1998, Foreign Appropriations Act of 1999, so on and so forth. Their new clutches are strangulating Pakistan in the shape of IFIs, FATF, Freedom of Expression, Women Emancipation and Human Rights. There is a long index of maltreatment meted out to Pakistan which has lost more than it has embraced in the process. The Reason behind this prejudicial treatment is that ‘we were never, we are not and we will never be in their strategic mosaic as partners and equals’.
Pak-Russia bilateral relations were at the lowest in the 1960s. We both came a bit closer once the US and West embarked on a lost cause like the USSR and invaded Afghanistan. Blinded by its military and economic might, the US did not consider lessons from history. Scenes of fleeing from Afghanistan in August 2021 have not only cracked their myth of mightiness but would haunt them in times to come.
In the existing environment, both Russia and Pakistan are eager to enhance bilateral relations but both have ineluctable fault lines, with severity towards Pakistan’s seat of the pendulum. However, this visit is a tiny piece of evolving world power construct. The way geo-politics is shaping, this would go a long way especially in our regional perspective. As the day stands, the West’s strategy of brute force irrespective of the collaterals has fast eroded their acceptability and myth. Their downfall has already begun as the World power status is fast changing hands and embracing China. Chinese developmental diplomacy, being all inclusive, global and masses centric, has been a major attraction. Countries that have been strangulated militarily, economically, diplomatically or those who have been used and divorced are now fast melting towards China. No country has taken hits more than Pakistan. It has been robbed of its potentials, subjected to sustained economic strangulation, kept clutched in cultural and systematic imperialism, intruded enough for moles to be created in each strata of society, and abandoned numerous times in the middle of quagmires. It seems Pakistan has now decided to make a paradigm shift in its policy of fruitless appeasement to mutually beneficial relations with all, based on equality and dignity. On paper, the path seems very smooth but while traversing it, the ride would be bumpy and choking as the West would unleash all moles to reinforce the metallurgy of their clutches.
In the given context, Pakistan and Russia stand on the right path for enhancing bilateral relations. There has already been seven sessions of IGC exploring economic, trade and energy avenues besides others. Pakistan and Russian Armed Forces are cementing their ties through JMCC since 2018. Russia was among the 45 other countries Pakistan hosted for Aman Naval Exercises in 2021. Foreign Ministers of both countries have also held interactions to strengthen bilateral ties at an accelerated pace. Both Russia and Pakistan are keen enough to hug each other for peace in Afghanistan as it would make their backyards peaceful and stable, facilitating much needed economic development. Russia has been the only major power that has sided with PM Imran Khan in countering Islamophobia. President Putin’s statement, that defaming Holy Prophet (PBUH) can never be dumped under so called ‘Freedom of Expression’, has won the hearts and minds of Muslims around the globe. Such gestures and understanding would not only dilute the engineered western narrative of portraying Russia as a devil but would set the tone for deepening Pak-Russia bilateral interdependence.
Based on their stakes, our ruling elite across the strata of society would continue to be the puppet of the west. All have safe havens there and these safe havens not only protect them, but envelope their kids and plundered wealth shamelessly. During the visit days, our media was hell bent to spread the western narrative about the PM’s visit to Russia and the Ukraine issue. The media was all set to portray Russia as a devil and political parties were in a race to sound their allegiance to their western masters. These spoony people were unmasking themselves as they were getting hotter than the pans. Given the critical time and negative media glare over the Ukrainian issue, President Putin would never forget PM Imran Khan’s visit. The unfolding of protocols, unprecedented reception, lengthy engagements and comprehensive press statements truly reflect that the visit would further cement our bilateral relations. Given the roots and stakes of the West in Pakistan, this visit would not be easily digested by the US-led West, India and our ruling elite. Pakistan must play its statecraft skillfully to keep up the momentum of the visit for solidifying bilateral relations. It is going to be a test of national resolve.