**Neighbourhood issues**

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Deep in trouble at home on the political and economic front while suffering new hits on the security question, Pakistan has managed to remain engaged on some critical neighbourhood issues.

Two are particularly important. One, the deepening of ties with Iran, a neighbour with whom the advantages of a 980km border, a shared history, and complementarity in commerce and connectivity have been denied to both Pakistan and Iran. Instead cross-border trouble along shared borders has allowed shadows of distrust to hover over bilateral relations. Two, on Kashmir Pakistan has contributed to undermining the Indian effort to validate the occupation of Jammu and Kashmir by hosting a diplomatic gala in Srinagar.

On Iran, the decade-old Polan-Gabd transmission line project, through which 100MW of electricity from Iran will be exported to Gwadar town, will be a boost for Gwadar. As Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi, Sharif proposed, as had his predecessor Imran Khan, that surveillance mechanisms along the border must be improved. For long, there has been cross-border trouble and absence of an efficiently functioning surveillance system. Sharif undertook to personally oversee within Pakistan the setting up of an efficient surveillance system.

Similarly, Pakistan was also able to practically advance relations by inaugurating an important border market at Mand-Pishin. These border markets, of which six in all along the entire border will be established, will help consolidate bilateral ties, initiating the beginning of cross-border trade. Over time, with better organically evolving trade systems, it will replace smuggling with genuine trade. Multiple advantages including development and prosperity within border towns will be accrued on both sides of the divide.

Finally, the most important project is the long delayed Iran-Pakistan pipeline project. Initiated in 2009, the project involves laying down of pipeline networks on both sides of the border. Completion of the project has been repeatedly delayed largely because of US sanctions on Iran. Many among Pakistan’s policymakers believed that a project signed before the US sanctions would not be affected by the sanctions. Interestingly, in early March Pakistan’s Public Accounts Committee recommended that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs write to the US ambassador and seek American permission to proceed with the project. Earlier too, the ministry has requested US administration for permission. In case, according to the penalty clause in the project contract, either side is unable to complete their part of the project till March 2024, it will have to pay $18 billion in fine.

How far the prime minister ensures the completion of the IP project under which Pakistan will receive 750 million cubic feet of desperately needed gas daily is yet to be seen.

On Kashmir, Pakistan’s advocacy and the struggle of the Kashmiris did stonewall Delhi’s effort to hold a successful G20 meeting in Srinagar. The G20 meeting on tourism, staged through an elaborately manicured diplomacy gala, within the context of hyper-security and strict clampdown of civil liberties, itself is a mere sham.

This is clearly indicated by the very important absentees of this diplomacy ‘gala’: China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt have not attended the meeting. Others like Indonesia sent a junior delegation of Delhi-based diplomats.

Into its third century of a freedom struggle, the Kashmiri movement continues to send ripples across the global scene, mostly on the diplomatic front. Decked in colour and music, crafting this farcical festivity is not likely to help Delhi legitimize its control over Occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

The hyper security arrangements reflected the attempt by the Indian state to pacify the occupied Kashmiris of Srinagar. Special forces including the Indian National Security Guards have been present at the venue of Dal Lake, Indian flags have covered the security posts, soldiers trained for ‘invisible policing’ are crawling all over as rubber boats with naval commandos patrol the lake.

Interestingly, the Indian paradox moves on. As India is welcomed into major global alliances, its feet of clay do not remain hidden. The Indian prime minister’s past haunts him. For example, Modi’s BBC brawl continues. In the defamation suit filed against the BBC documentary, ‘India: the Modi question’, aired earlier this year, BBC has now been summoned in court. The Indian government called the documentary, which did not air in India, a biased "propaganda piece". BBC did not retract any content from the documentary.

Tales of oppression by the Indian state include the killing and silencing of Kashmiri voices. From the assassinated Wani to the imprisoned JKLF leader Yasin Malik and the internationally recognized human rights activist Khurram Parvez’s death, the Kashmiri call for freedom will grow louder.

The absentee delegates, not big in number, may only seem like a flash in the pan yet there is cumulative power of these events. Woven together, the decades-long stories of repression and resistance often become motivational weapons of the oppressed. For Kashmiris, it is no different.

And as it dovetails into the broader geopolitical contest between a rising and strong China and a politically troubled India, the Kashmir cause promises to overshadow all of India’s attempts to find an untarnished place in the sun. Like Pakistan, China – a UNSC permanent member – will increasingly resist India’s attempt to succeed in its colonial settler project in Occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Finally, the G20 meeting attendance will reflect the reality of how various countries engage with one of the most serious human rights and political rights issues on the global scene. The environment within Jammu and Kashmir shows the Indian state’s repression of a people fighting for freedom.

Pakistan unequivocally reiterated its support for Kashmiri self-determination as Foreign Minister Bilalwal Bhutto repeated Pakistan’s demand that India rescind its unilateral and illegal actions of Aug 5, 2019 and take steps to fully implement the UNSC resolution and allow the Kashmiri people to exercise their right to self determination through a UN supervised plebiscite and to not allow non-Kashmiris to acquire property or residency in J&K.

Pakistan’s troubles at home and the pressures from Western friends to normalize relations with India, their chosen counter-weight to a rising China, notwithstanding, there is no wavering of Pakistani support for the Kashmiris. And significantly the dynamics of Pakistan-India relations has strengthened Chinese support for the Kashmir cause – with Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia not far behind.

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