**Pakistan at Crossroads**

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Pakistan has always been at crossroads. At one end of the political spectrum, the country sits at a critical crossroads of global terrorism, while on the other end, its rivalry with the regional hegemon India has caused a plethora of issues. Historically, the US-Pakistan relations have largely followed a clientelistic pattern. The patron needed a regional broker to contain communism, to play the middleman vis-à-vis China, and to offer support in the post 9/11 global war on terror. The client needed arms and money to resist India, a neighbour, which continues to over determine its foreign policy.

Forecasting a peaceful Afghanistan in foreseeable future is nothing but a “wishful thinking”. The withdrawal of USA troops from Afghanistan is a lull before storm, giving birth to a strategic dilemma for foreign policy makers of the world. The war in Afghanistan will continue having roots inside the country, while stretching towards each corner of the world. Afghanistan will continue as a breeding ground for clusters of mercenaries to contest proxy wars all over the world as these are not the fighting groups as were of 1980s and 1990s, which could be steered at the will of sponsoring agencies. Whosoever pays the asking price, will get the job done. Pakistan will continue as one of the adversely affected neighbouring countries as writ of the governments on both sides of Durand Line is questionable.

Writing about Pakistan-U.S. relations is like composing a bit of literary criticism of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” at all times searching for new solutions to previously nagging questions. Pakistan – US relationship is not based on any ideological, societal, or economic affinity. Both countries had a common enemy, and therefore, their relationship was supported by a strong common objective. As Richard Armitage admitted in 2002, Pakistan was by no means vital to America in its personal proper. It was vital due to third party events and its significance for Washington derived from the significance of South Asia. The fact that India has become closer to the USA, and China-Pakistan’s “all-weather friendship” has been perceived as a threat to Americans, there is no doubt that Pakistan is seeking to shed its client status with respect to the United States in the current scenario. Pakistan’s aspirations to become a pivotal state are evident from its intentions of strengthening relations with the European Union, Russia, the Muslim world, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and especially China to escape the United States.

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The trajectory of the Sino-Pakistan relations has remained on course, un-wavering and determined, since its formative years in the 1950s. The strength of this alliance has remained consistent, thus, making the Sino-Pakistan alliance unique, even though the two states have never signed any formal alliance or defense pact. Although Beijing is certainly an all-weather friend of Pakistan, it is not clear yet if the former is prepared to support its protege, at least financially, as much as the United States did. China has increasingly invested in Pakistan, and a retreat of USA Army from Afghanistan pushes China to engage more intensively for multiple reasons. Firstly, China acutely needs oil and commodities to arrive through alternative routes, which traditionally come from the Middle East via the Indian Ocean. Therefore, insecurity in Pakistan would surely postpone the layout of infrastructure, such as the CPEC and OBOR. The future course of the Pakistan-China alliance is contingent on China’s vital national interest and strategic goals.

Over the years, we have seen changes in relations between China and India, China and the United States, and Pakistan and the United States, but the Pakistan-India rivalry has remained consistent. The probability of the termination of Indo-Pakistan’s rivalry is weak. The intriguing question would be, where and how would the Sino-Pakistan alliance position itself without the Indian nexus? Would the Sino-Pak alliance diminish in that situation, or would it rise to a much stronger regional alliance?

The Sino-Pakistan alliance was structured on a common goal, which is the containment or encirclement of India, but the interests and motives for both were different. The motivation for Pakistan is rooted in its insecurities vis-a-vis India, and China seeks to maintain its strategic position of being the dominant economic and military power in the region. This is a realpolitik par excellence, and it resembles the Chinese game “weiqi”, a game of encirclement. Pakistan in this equation is one of the strategic pieces for China in its game to gain regional or ultimately global supremacy.

The growing USA – China rivalry is especially significant given the fraught South Asian security environment where the USA continues investing in India to counter-balance China. The speed with which this rivalry is intensifying has created a precarious situation for Pakistan. However, with a purpose to be helpful towards both the USA and China, Pakistan has to construct inner power, elevate its contribution to peace efforts in Afghanistan, assist stabilising Afghanistan and improve its potential as a financial associate.

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