**What is the quid pro quo?**

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Now Pakistan: US and Pakistan interests have converged and diverged regularly. The US has generally engaged Pakistan through transactional deals only, offering the barest minimum economic and military aid to satiate it and meet its own objectives at that particular point in time. Thereafter, geopolitics has always reigned supreme; with the US distancing itself from Pakistan and the latter feeling let down, used, discarded and frustrated—till the next time! Pakistan’s vulnerability has generally lain in its weak political and military rulers accentuated further by its invariably poor economy. The US has exploited these most dexterously to achieve its desired end states in the region.

The US perhaps needs to engage Pakistan yet again, as an essential element of its Asia policy and its strategic design for the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) and the SAR, in particular.

At the geopolitical level, the US would prefer to see Pakistan still lean towards the US-led West and be weaned away from China. It would suit US regional interests were the Sino-Pakistan strategic partnership to be weakened and/or a disconnect achieved between the two neighbours. That would neutralise perhaps the most dynamic strategic partnership in the region, create more strategic space for the US-led West and India and make Pakistan more dependent upon the West. It would further nullify China’s access to the Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean via the BRI-CPEC/Makran Coast, stunt the expansion of the BRI-CPEC, re-emphasise the importance and value of the Malacca Straits choke point vis a vis Gwadar and deny China the benefits of being a two-ocean nation. It would ostensibly meet India’s regional ambitions and interests, too. A peculiar triangular relationship exists in the SAR between China, India and Pakistan. India generally cannot deal effectively with either China or Pakistan without taking the other into consideration. A distancing of Pakistan from China would ease matters for India, (a strategic partner of the US), tremendously, while it would harm Pakistan’s vital national interests enormously. Furthermore, till the festering issue of Kashmir is resolved according to the UNSC Resolutions, there can be no genuine peace, cooperation or exchange of favours between India and Pakistan. Period.

At the geostrategic level, the US will expect India to engage China on the Himalayan front, fix a substantial part of the PLA there and create a favourable environment for it and its allies in the IPR. However, the current strategic environment and strategic balance (considering China and Pakistan, individually and together) in the SAR are much to India’s detriment. These three major military and nuclear-missile powers sit eyeball to eyeball along the LOC and the LAC within this potential albeit congested theatre of war. India has issues with both China and Pakistan and faces a fearful two-front war scenario. It becomes worse as a three-front war, if the destabilised inner front in the IIOJ&KR is brought into contention. It finds both China and Pakistan militaries sitting on the pincers along the LOC and LAC. They could potentially threaten a double envelopment to meet somewhere in the IIOJ&KR, trap the Indian formations in Ladakh and force a decision on India. India does not have the military capability or capacity to overwhelm Pakistan alone, much less China and even lesser if it has to confront both simultaneously. It would suit the US strategic design tremendously were Pakistan to be neutralised to “free India up” to engage China only. That would be a repeat of the fateful 1962 Sino-India war scenario. That would be at unbearable costs to Pakistan’s vital national interests. Pakistan will do well to remember the lessons of history.

At the geo-economic level, the US-led West would like to see the BRI-CPEC’s expansion into Afghanistan and Iran and beyond delayed, disrupted or destroyed. The CPEC has already brought major benefits to Pakistan’s economy and promises many more. Pakistan can ill afford to lose these investments/developments in its economy and infrastructure. Were Pakistan to distance itself from China it would lose this chance to kickstart its own economy and revitalise regional connectivity and economic interdependence.

The adverse strategic environment and strategic balance in the SAR divides and dissipates India’s military capabilities. It will thus struggle to accomplish the tasks assigned to it. It will always emerge as a weak spot in the overall strategic design meant to contain and confront China. India might like to consider the alternative of seeking friendly relations with its neighbours, resolving all its issues with them and ending up in a win-win situation in all respects.

Pakistan finds itself at a crossroads. It has had an on-again-off-again relationship with the US that does not inspire much confidence, reliability, credibility and permanence in their bilateral ties. Pakistan is currently in an apparent strategic partnership with China. They have very close and promising economic, diplomatic, military, technological and political ties. It is therefore imperative for Pakistan to maintain this multidimensional strategic partnership at all costs. US and Pakistan’s interests diverge quite emphatically here.

Pakistan too must ask that billion-dollar question; what is the quid pro quo and is it really worth it? Will our economy, debt, infrastructure and Kashmir be on the table? Unlikely. It will be extremely difficult for the US-led West to match or out-bid the development programs under the BRI-CPEC, too. It would be next to impossible for the US-led West to articulate an acceptable solution to the IIOJ&KR issue under the UNSC resolutions. India will never agree. What else could the US-led West offer in return? If there is no viable quid pro quo available then the only other option left is coercion—economic, diplomatic, technological and if need be, military. The employment of Terrorism Central from Afghanistan cannot be ruled out summarily either. Multidimensional coercion however might engender unintended consequences.

Were potential Chinese countermeasures to be factored in, it would make for an even more complex and volatile strategic environment. Pakistan must forge a balanced foreign policy that secures its vital national interests, its strategic partnership with China without prejudice to its great relationships with the US-led West.

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