**To Friendship…**

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April 26, 2024

Promises by Pakistan and Iran’s executive to increase bilateral trade to an ambitious 10 billion dollars might have been music to the ears of those who constantly talk about the importance of making bridges in the neighbourhood. With just one calm border, Pakistan enjoys notoriety for its inclination to act like a no-man’s land. However, the celebratory galas better stop. The two South Asian countries might have signed eight cooperation agreements, pledging to support one another against terrorism and militant outfits. No qualms about that.

The visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Pakistan as the first in over eight years does enthuse some hope for restored ties, especially when both Islamabad and Tehran wish to smooth over frictions in the wake of recent tit-for-tat strikes. But such phenomenal friendships are easier to commit to than stay loyal to. It is not the 1970s when Pakistan could dare to look into the superpowers’ eyes and continue forging its friendships. Moving a step ahead, it even perfected a strategic triangle with the US and China. Today, when the US State Department warns it to choose its foreign policy pursuits at its own risk, all momentum comes to a standstill and there’s nothing more than Pakistan can do other than shifting weight from one foot to another. There could not have been a more glaring manifestation of this than the most pressing contract regarding the supply of Iranian gas, which still hangs in the air. The high-profile yet controversial gas supply deal was signed in 2010, seeking to provide relief to Pakistan’s failing energy sector.

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It languishes over political turmoil and international sanctions. Because the US has repeatedly cautioned it to think twice before engaging in business deals with Iran, Pakistan is left with no other option but to delay operations or come up with out-of-the-box solutions to avert legal penalties. Even this week, largely in continuation of its policy to restrict Iran’s finances ever since it proceeded with its nuclear programme, Washington used a routine news briefing to extend its apprehensions on the two neighbours inching closer. From the looks of it, no time was wasted in letting the state guest head back home before a critical ally flexed its muscles and gritted its teeth.

Of course, the US alone does not hold the reins. The bilateral relationship has never been cordial despite sharing a common border, people-to-people linkages, and a strong cultural framework to support lasting collaborations. May it be the failure of repeated efforts by the governments to streamline trade to increase revenue offers to launch joint anti-terrorism operations in the neighbouring areas or the age-old claims over Pakistan’s border regions, a lot still needs to be sorted in the equation. Why is it that Iran, a supposed fierce critic of Israel’s atrocities in Gaza had the time and the interest to call “for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, unimpeded humanitarian access to the besieged people of Gaza, return of the displaced Palestinians, as well as ensuring accountability of the crimes being committed by the Israeli regime” but refused to engage on the issue of Kashmir? A lot of water may have gone under the bridge but even without the West factor, Pakistan would still need reassurances from its Western neighbour if it wishes to translate this flimsy once-in-several-years acquaintance into an actual partnership.

Despite all the challenges and high stakes, it is still crucial for Pakistan to engage with Iran and identify solutions to its financial woes. Pakistan is fast running out of affordable energy options and therefore, the recent visit by the Iranian President should be considered an increasingly positive step towards this goal.

Pakistan’s ruling elite must take bold steps to address the energy crisis and explore all available options. Our prime minister had once remarked, “beggars can’t be choosers,” but trying to come up with an arrangement that convinces all allies could be the greatest test of its diplomacy and count as a personal success of Mr Sharif. Pakistan should not be seen compromising its national interests while seeking solutions. The country must engage with all stakeholders, including Iran, the US, and other countries, to find a sustainable solution. Failing to do so would simply mean we are fast losing our credibility to function as a sovereign state. A while ago, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi quoted our economic fiascos to defend his posturing towards Russia for inexpensive fuel. We may not be a tiger economy yet but last time someone checked, we still counted among independent countries.

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