**Pakistan and South Asia**

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Pakistan is a part of one of the most problematic regions in the world, namely South Asia. The region has been marred with bilateral conflicts and multilateral distrust for quite a long now. The regional conflicts in South Asia have led to the profound involvement of global players in the region as well. The global powers indulge in South Asian politics in the pursuit of their respective political goals.

The United States is primarily interested in the region to pursue its larger political agenda viz-a-viz China along with its politico-economic goals in the Asia-Pacific region. Though the embarrassing US withdrawal from Afghanistan marks the end of US military presence in the region, it would definitely continue to employ other means to further its political and economic interests in the region.

China, on the other hand, seeks to establish a stronger economic interaction in the region. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the “One Belt, One Road” project are the practical manifestations of Chinese economic goals in the region.

Russia, another major power, has been India-centric in its dealings with the region, historically viewing the region from the Indian perspective. However, the recent past has witnessed a policy shift in Russia with a preference for an all-inclusive relationship with the region. Russia’s improvement of its ties with Pakistan is a testament to this policy shift.

Socio-economically speaking, the region is sharply divided between ultra-rich people and very poor people.

Considering the dynamics of politics in South Asia owing to regional rivalries and distrust as well as substantial involvement of global powers, there are certainly viable options available to the smaller states of the region including Pakistan. Before enumerating the policy options available to the regional states, it is important to discuss the social, economic, and political dynamics of the region.

Even Bangladesh, considered to be the most ethnically homogenous country in the region, is not purely homogenous with the presence of some tribes as well as ethnic and linguistic groups. The region hosts 22 per cent of the population of the world whereas it ranks among the lowest in HDI. Poverty and under-development are consistent across the region as an outcome of the lesser spending on education and health as compared to the majority of the world.

Socio-economically speaking, the region is sharply divided between ultra-rich people and very poor people, with an astonishing and ever-widening gap between them. A few per cent of the population is qualified or has some kind of professional knowledge while the majority is either illiterate or devoid of any professional knowledge that could make them useful contributors to society. Sri Lanka, with a literacy rate of 91.5%, is the most literate state of South Asia.

India is the biggest state of South Asia in terms of area, population, economy, and military that seeks to act as the regional hegemon. India desires the rest of the region to adopt policies that are in line with its politico-economic goals, even if it amounts to the unconditional surrender of autonomy on the part of the regional states. Most recently, India’s objection to Nepalese and Sri Lankan warmth towards China is a testament to this fact. Pakistan being the arch-rival of India, vehemently resists such Indian pressure and even seeks extra-regional help in this regard.

Considering the regional dynamics of South Asia, there are certainly viable policy options available to the smaller states of the region.

Pakistan has no other choice but to maintain a reliable defence system in conventional and nuclear terms that is inevitable to deter Indian ambitions to launch a full-scale military attack on Pakistan. In the wake of the absence of nuclear deterrence, PM Narendra Modi’s India would not have hesitated to launch such a full-scale military attack on Pakistan.

With the Indian hegemonic ambitions being deterred by the nuclear capability of Pakistan, India had adopted a broad three-pronged strategy against Pakistan. First, India has consistently kept Pakistan engaged militarily on the Line of Control in Kashmir without ever letting it escalate into a full-scale war that could lead to a nuclear disaster. Secondly, India patronizes the terrorist groups and Baloch insurgents to destabilize Pakistan internally. Thirdly, India resorts to international propaganda to malign Pakistan as a ‘rogue’ state that facilitates terrorism in the neighbouring states or else a failing state incapable of safeguarding its nuclear assets. However, the allegations are largely unfounded.

The broader definition of security is not limited to military security. Pakistan needs to pay particular attention to the development of its human resource by greater investment in education and healthcare that would lead to a more vibrant society, a flourishing economy, and a greater role in global affairs.

On the diplomatic front, though Pakistan has a reliable partner in China, Pakistan needs to establish sustainable relations with other major global players, especially Russia, European Union. At the same time, Pakistan should strengthen its ties with Turkey, Iran as well as the Arab states without offending either party.

The world is changing fast, especially in the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Many of the global players are revamping their global strategies as the world is drifting towards an era of various blocks. Pakistan must explore new markets and create a more investor-friendly environment within to attain sustainable development. Pakistan must, at the same time, strive to eliminate social and religious extremism for the establishment of a tolerant and prospering society.

Last but not the least, no long-term goals can be achieved without the requisite political stability within a state. With the promotion of a tolerant society where differences of opinion are respected, a thorough revamping of political culture and electoral system, as well as the eradication of corrupt practices on all fronts can provide Pakistan with the so much needed political stability and good governance. Only in this way, the country can embark upon the route to enduring strength, autonomy, and greater political say.

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