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Modi, Sharif in ‘win-win’ setting

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India [TAPI] gas pipeline project has been making progress — albeit under the radar and visible only to keen observers — during the past year. The fact that Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chaired a meeting of the petroleum ministers of the TAPI member countries in Islamabad today would signal that the project is likely approaching the takeoff stage.

The presence of the Indian minister Dharmendra Pradhan in Islamabad also underscores that the climate of the India-Pakistan relations could be transforming. Conceivably, there has been gentle prodding by the United States from behind the curtain. The American oil companies have shown interest in the project, including in equity participation. But, more than that, TAPI forms a template in the US’ New Silk Road strategies. Unsurprisingly, US and Japan have a renewed interest in the TAPI as a mega regional project against the backdrop of China’s rival Asian Infrastructure Development Bank and the ‘Belt and Road’ strategies. Interestingly, the president of the Asian Development Bank [ADB] Takehiko Nakao visited Delhi last week and met Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

However, the esoteric ‘great game’ apart, if the TAPI project takes off, that would do a world of good to India-Pakistan relations, which is the key point here from our point of view. The project’s uniqueness is that it could make Pakistan a ‘stakeholder’ in stable relationship with India – and vice versa. More importantly, it enables the two countries to bury the backlog of the

past and move on to a new phase in the geopolitical arena where the stabilization of Afghanistan becomes a shared concern rather than an issue of rivalry. The single biggest element of distrust in the Pakistani mind about India's intentions would also get removed – namely, Pakistan's suspicions regarding Indian activities in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Modi has paid great attention to improving India's relations with China. That is indeed far-sighted statesmanship. But, on the contrary, he has relegated the Pakistan policies to the back burner; in fact, this state of play recently drew a pointed observation by President Pranab Mukherjee. (See my blog *[The President jogs Modi's memory.](#)*)

In the absence of PM's forceful political guidance, bit players have got onto the driving seat and that always holds the danger of creating a vicious chain of actions and reactions, which at some point spins out of control. The recent move by the Indian border authorities to detain the Pakistani truck drivers (in contravention of the bilateral protocol) is a typical example. The border trade between the divided halves of Kashmir has got suspended. And this happened at a time when the formation of a coalition government between the PDP and the BJP in J&K is on the cards.

Prime Minister Modi needs to connect the dots in the 'big picture'. The improvement of India-China relations should go hand in hand with the resumption of India-Pakistan dialogue. That is the optimal way India could exploit the new opportunities opening up via its upcoming membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to meaningfully contribute to regional security and stability (and also create an external environment most conducive for the pursuit of our development agenda.) The PM's 'out-of-the-box' thinking on China relations is very impressive. He needs to adopt a similar forward-looking approach toward Pakistan — and take a leap of faith. To be sure, the TAPI project can be a game changer. Prime Minister Sharif has signaled his personal commitment.