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<http://atimes.com/2015/04/pakistan-china-iran-and-the-remaking-of-regional-security/>

Pakistan, China, Iran and the remaking of regional security

By M.K. Bhadrakumar

4/18/2015

The regional security in South Asia and the adjacent regions to the west and north are on the cusp of a profound transformation. Broadly, there are three vectors involved here.

One, Iran's integration with the international community as a 'normal country', a process that has already begun; two, the historic entente between Russia and China which has consolidated almost immeasurably in the past one year period since the New Cold War tendencies began appearing; and, three, a largely-unnoticed but extremely significant shift in the foreign-policy priorities of Pakistan, a genuinely 'pivotal' state in the politics of South Asia, given its highly strategic geographic location in the South Asian region, from where it impacts regional security in Central Asia and West Asia.

The state visit by the Chinese President Xi Jinping to Pakistan on Monday in many ways brings together the three vectors. The visit is, on the face of it, a bilateral event of historic significance to the long-standing ties between the two relationship, which from all accounts can be expected to add much strategic content to the relationship and elevate it to an altogether qualitatively new level.

However, China is also playing the long game insofar as Beijing is actually beginning the implementation of its "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which is a global project in character and scope and all but prefaces China's inexorable rise on the world stage as a superpower.

It is extraordinary that China is committing such massive investment in excess 40 billion dollars in a single country, undeterred by the perception in the western financial circles that Pakistan is a “failing state” and a revolving door of international terrorism.

In the eighties or nineties, this would have lent itself to interpretation as “India-centric” and as a diabolical move by the Chinese policymakers to strengthen Pakistan’s capacity to challenge India, a common foe. But that is no more the case today. The impulses driving the Chinese policies toward Pakistan today are to be found elsewhere.

First and foremost, Pakistan’s stability has come to be a matter of serious concern from the perspective of China’s internal security needs, which is attributable not only to the spurt in terrorist activities in Xinjiang by groups that are to be traced to the Af-Pak region, but also out of China’s emergent concerns as a stakeholder in regional stability that is an imperative need to advance its regional and global policies (politico-military, economic and cultural) more optimally.

The dramatic shift in the Chinese thinking apropos of the issues of terrorism in South Asia and Beijing’s unmistakable empathy with India’s concerns as a victim of terrorism testify to this. A leading Indian daily brought this home today reporting from Beijing an extraordinary statement attributed to the head of the Chinese foreign ministry think-tank Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceanic Studies, Hu Shisheng that China finds itself “awkward diplomatically” to have taken a “neutral stand” on the terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2011.

Hu said, “India’s concerns over terrorism will be addressed in a more constructive way. China also suffered due to terrorism.” He said China has suffered from U.S. double standards on terrorism and should not behave in a similar fashion.

Therefore, on the one hand, China hopes to contribute to the stabilization of Pakistan in a way that the United States has never attempted in the entire chronicle of its dalliance with Pakistan as a “non-NATO ally” over the past decades – either due to paucity of resources or lack of genuine interest or an innate hesitation in getting engaged deeply, while on the other hand, in terms of both its self-interests and in the larger interests of regional security, China hopes to leverage its friendship and cooperation with Pakistan to reinforce the recent shifts in Islamabad’s policies toward terrorist groups.

If the United States had been hoping that there could be a Sino-American condominium over Pakistan’s future (something that U.S. officials and analysts have been propagating in the most recent years), clearly, they have been barking up the wrong tree. China is showing no sign of interest in getting entangled with what passes for the US’ regional strategies.

The “Belt and Road” projects that are expected to be unveiled during Xi’s visit to Pakistan next week are entirely funded out of China’s sovereign wealth. The heart of the matter is that future historians will take note of Xi’s visit in 2015 to Islamabad as marking the beginning of the end of American manipulation of the Pakistani policy calculus, which began six decades ago with the military coup staged by Ayub Khan in the early 1950s.

At the very minimum, China is creating a situation, wittingly or unwittingly, whereby the U.S. has no negotiate much harder than ever before to extract any favors. It is a tactical move on China's part. But then, in reality, though, the purge of American influence over Pakistan is also a strategic necessity for China, given the nature of Washington's compass navigating the "pivot to Asia" strategies.

Without doubt, Pakistan (along with Central Asia and Iran) becomes a gateway for China to the world market and it is crucial for Beijing that Washington's ability to block this gateway is "zero". Pakistan is actually the single most critical gateway for China in the emergent paradigm. Arguably, that alone could explain the extraordinary extent to which China is making the stabilization of Pakistan a real-time dimension to its own national policies of development.

China's relations with the Central Asian region are already advanced to a high level. Despite concerted U.S. attempts to create unease in the Russian mind regarding China's rising influence in the Central Asian region, the two great powers have seen through the American ploys and have carefully calibrated their moves in such a way that a remarkable degree of harmonization of their respective policies has been possible so far.

China treads carefully not to be seen as challenging even inadvertently Russia's dominant presence in the Central region, while Moscow has its uses for China's unmatched contribution to the region's economic progress and development and trusts the Central Asian leaders to appreciate that Russia's regional leadership is unique and is irreplaceable, both historically speaking and in a contemporary sense. Most important, China and Russia share a great wariness about any projection of American power into Central Asia. Thus, both China and Russia have become stakeholders in the region's security and the stability of the regimes there.

The Russian-Chinese entente and mutual understanding has touched a very high level today that makes it impossible for Washington to create misperceptions or sow seeds of discord between the two great powers. The "westernists" among the Russian elites are generally in retreat and the objective considerations in which Russia is placed in Eurasia also prompt Moscow to move closer to Beijing.

Only last week, Russian energy officials for the first time spoke of a scenario whereby beyond 2019 it will be entirely up to Europe to seek out and ensure that Russian gas is tapped from Greece where it will reach via the Turkish Stream pipeline, whereas Moscow will always have the alternative to divert the "European gas" to the market China via the new Altai pipeline.

Interestingly, Moscow also announced last week that China is the first country to be supplied its latest S-400 anti-ballistic missile defense system, which is currently in service only with the Russian armed forces and is rated as the most capable SAM system in use in the Asia-Pacific region.

To be sure, both China and Russia understand perfectly well that it is in their common interest to counter the U.S. regional strategies. They have no illusion that the U.S.' containment strategy is aimed at both of them and, therefore, it is in their interest to coordinate their moves to defeat the U.S. agenda.

Unsurprisingly, a level of coordination between Moscow and Beijing as regards their regional policies toward Pakistan is also conceivable. The Russian and Pakistani defense ministers signed an agreement in Moscow on Friday, just two days before Xi's arrival in Islamabad, marking the commencement of the first-ever military exercises between the two countries, taking a significant step forward in the direction of the "thaw" in the making in their overall relationship.

To be sure, Russia can be expected to cash in on the decline of American influence in Pakistan. From the Russian perspective, Pakistan's cooperation is vital to augment its efforts to forestall the U.S.'s likely future plans to use violent Islamist groups as its geopolitical tool to destabilize north Caucasus and the regimes in the Central Asian region. Russia is beefing up its military presence in Central Asia against the backdrop of the establishment of U.S. military bases in Afghanistan and has also opened a political channel to the national unity government in Kabul. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov received the Afghan national security advisor Mohammad Hanif Atmar in Moscow this week, which followed up a visit by the Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah to Moscow in February.

Indeed, nothing helps Moscow to frustrate the U.S.' hostile moves from the Afghan springboard than the cooperation and understanding from Pakistan. Thus, both Beijing and Moscow would have noted with interest Pakistan's claims of a basic shift in its approach to terrorist groups.

It is apparent Pakistan took an extremely painful decision to spurn the request from Saudi Arabia for military help to sustain the GCC states' intervention in Yemen. At the end of the day, it goes much beyond a statement of Pakistan's policy toward Yemen. Of course, it became a litmus test of the vindication of Pakistani public opinion weighing on a representative democratically elected government.

But, beyond all that lies a profoundly meaningful signpost insofar as it is also signaling a disinterest in being drawn into yet another war, and a measure of disengagement, therefore, from Saudi Arabia's regional enterprises in general, the likelihood of a deleterious impact on the overall climate of relations between the two allies notwithstanding.

Simply put, Islamabad is also showing reluctance bordering on disinterest in dabbling with a regional-policy trajectory that has ultimately brought only unspeakable sorrows and devastation for itself over the past decades, ever since the communist takeover in Kabul in 1978 and the Islamic Revolution in Iran the very next year at which point the Saudi-Pakistani dalliance began truly blossoming into a full-fledged strategic alliance under the American patronage, riveted on the lure of "jihadism".

Both Russia and China would comprehend that Pakistan is desperately probing a new direction and the obstacles are many. (India too is not helping matters.) They would realize that it is in their own vital interests that Pakistan's search for a new direction gets strengthened and bears fruits so that it becomes irreversible.

Comparatively speaking, Russia has an added sense of urgency, too, since it has been at the receiving end of the U.S. – Pakistani alliance for decades and there could be an end in sight, finally. Suffice it to say, given the factors at work, the Russian-Pakistani relations are ready for a

makeover precisely at a juncture when the Chinese strategies toward Pakistan are outgrowing their traditional bilateral (or regional) dimensions and beginning to assume a global character.

Significantly, both Russia and China (and Pakistan, too) are also currently restructuring their policies toward Iran even as that country's integration with the international community gets under way. There have been several high-level exchanges between Moscow and Tehran in the past 2-3 period no sooner than it became clear that the talks between Tehran and the "world powers" on the nuclear issue had gained traction.

Many new proposals have lately emerged in the direction of adding strategic content to the Russian-Iranian relationship – return of Russian oil companies to Iran, construction of more Russian-made nuclear power plants in Iran, Phase II of Bushehr plant, the \$20 billion barter deal whereby Russia would receive half a million barrels of Iranian oil per day for supply of various products and so on.

To cap it all, President Vladimir Putin cleared the deal for the S-300 missile defence system for Iran. Evidently, Russia hopes to establish a key presence in Iran in the energy and military sphere. But the strategic dimension will be that Russia is encouraging Iran to preserve its independent foreign policies and "strategic autonomy" and is challenging the West's aspirations to transform Iran into a citadel of western interests in a pale image of what it used to be till the 1979 Islamic Revolution rewrote regional politics and current history in that region.

Again, there is enough evidence that Russia and China could be coordinating their approaches toward the New Iran. The Wall Street Journal reported last week that China might be willing to undertake the construction of an Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Meanwhile, Xi is planning a path-breaking visit to Iran very soon. A visit by Putin is also pending. Will they beat Obama to Tehran? They might.

In sum, it makes sense that Russia and China hope to induct Iran and Pakistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization tent (SCO) as a full member in a very near future. The induction of these two strategically placed regional powers would bring the SCO to come out of the steppes of Central Asia into the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf and assume a new identity as the provider of security for a wide arc of countries. It will be an inevitable upgrade of Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory, attuning it to the emergent power dynamic in the Pivot Area.