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Fretting over Chabahar: Phobia or diversionary ploy by Pakistan?

By Lt Gen Prakash Katoch
6/6/ 2016

It was downright amusing to read an article in a prominent Pakistani daily titled ‘Trade route linking Chabahar Port with Afghanistan’ a security threat’. The article refers to deliberations by two former Pakistani defence secretaries (Lt Gen Asif Yasin Malik and Lt Gen Nadeem Lodhi) at a three-day workshop on ‘National Security, Deterrence and Regional Stability in South Asia’ hosted by the Strategic Vision Institute – a Pakistani think-tank. Asif Yasin Malik was reported to have said, “The alliance between India, Afghanistan and Iran is a security threat to Pakistan” and added that he feared that Pakistan is going into isolation. In view of the regional and global environment, I see Pakistan falling into an abyss of isolation primarily because of its own mistakes and partly due to the hostile policies of other states”. Nadeem Lodhi said the existence of such a “formidable bloc” in the neighbourhood had “ominous and far reaching implications”, adding, “We need to break out of this encircling move with help from friends... diplomatic manoeuvres and by forging a strong deterrence.” In this context, Lodhi said that of the three countries, Iran is most likely to pay heed to Pakistani concerns.

Asif Yasin Malik blamed the situation on the “dysfunctional Foreign Office” and the absence of a full time foreign minister. Nadeem Lodhi feared the three-nation bloc will affect Pakistan’s plans for regional economic integration, restoration of internal peace and maintenance of peaceful borders, as also affect the CPEC timelines. He suggested Pakistan should use China’s

influence for fixing problems, not alienate Iran further and Pakistan's defence and strategic relationship with China be formalized instead of an unwritten understanding. Staff reporters of the paper authoring the article alluded to these above statements as "reflection of the opinion held in military circles, which have been deeply suspicious of the port and the trade route". Interestingly, Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz recently stated during a recent press conference that Pakistan did not see Iran's Chabahar port as a rival and that Pakistan was in fact exploring the possibility of developing links with Gwadar. Mehdi Honardoost, Iran's envoy to Islamabad recently stated that Pakistan and China should join in on the Chabahar agreement, stressing that Gwadar and Chabahar ports should not be seen as rivals.

While India is perceived the number one enemy in the Pakistani (military) hierarchy, it would be apparent to even the most daft and naïve that India has no option but to do trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia other than via Chahabar. It is the dogged denial by Pakistan to open the land route through her own territory that would have opened a South-South Corridor linking Af-Pak with Southeast Asia through India, which in tandem with the International North-South Transportation Corridor would have brought economic prosperity to the entire region benefiting all countries along these routes including Pakistan. However, this has not happened because of the dog in the manger attitude of the Pakistani military. A Member Parliament of Pakistan disclosed last October that there was a time when Punjabi politicians of Pakistan were opposed to open up trade and economic ties with India, but now there was political consensus on the issue. However, the Pakistani military put its foot down, not allowing it to happen. Little wonder then that Pakistan has consistently spurned Prime Minister Modi's proposal since 2014 to develop connectivity within the SAARC countries for promoting economic integration, enhancing commerce and people to people contact.

Asif Yasin Malik and Nadeem Lodhi blaming the current situation on the Foreign Office and void of a full time foreign minister is laughable considering that both the foreign and defence policies of Pakistan are scripted and directed by the Pakistani military. It is for the same reason that the NSA hat of Sartaj Aziz was unceremoniously removed just before Nawaz Sharif's visit to the US last year and passed on to army chief Raheel Sharif's nominee. The irony in Pakistan was reiterated at the abovementioned workshop by Ghulam Mujadid from the Air University wherein he said that the eminence of security in national priorities is reflected in the four military takeovers in the country and the "ascendancy of military in political, internal and foreign policy decision making", adding, "Pakistan needs to correct this strategic myopia. A survivalist mindset about national security dominates the political discourse and continues to be the central pillar in Pakistan's strategic calculations".

Development of Chahabar Port and the India-Iran-Afghanistan tripartite trade and transit corridor agreement are economic arrangements for mutual benefit of the concerned countries. If the trade route linking Chahabar Port with Afghanistan is viewed as an encircling move and threat to Pakistan, it is a phobia because of the guilt of promoting terrorism in all these countries by the Pakistani military. Witness Nadeem Lodhi stating that Pakistan should not alienate Iran further – what was that in reference to; cross-border terror attacks in Iran using the Jundullah, Taliban and Haqqanis or deliberate snub to the visiting Iranian President telling him Iranian territory was being used for anti-Pakistan activities? But yes, India-Iran-Afghanistan obviously are discussing the scourge of terrorism. How many would know that in a Regional Security Conference held in

Bangladesh as far back in 2001, both Pakistani speakers (Shirin Mazari, Director General, Institute of Strategic Studies and Lt Gen Javed Hassan, Commandant, National Defence College) were propagating low intensity conflict, guerilla warfare, indirect and intervention as more viable options war including use of terrorism. More recently, Shirin Mazari had suggested that the Taliban should aim to surge beyond the western borders of Afghanistan – obviously to dominate the tripartite trade and transit corridor of India-Iran-Afghanistan.

Nadeem Lodhi's comments that the Chahabar project would affect the CPEC timelines and that Pakistan's defence and strategic relationship with China be formalized make interesting reading. Why would CPEC timelines be affected by the Chahabar project? Is it because the security of the 3000 kms long CPEC is becoming problematic even as the newly raised Pakistan's Special Security Division (SSD) is mandated to protect some 12000-14000 Chinese working on the CPEC and a PLA Brigade worth (vanguard of three PLA Divisions to protect the CPEC) deployed in Gilgit-Baltistan are proving inadequate with ongoing genocide in Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan. The repeated visit of senior Chinese officials and recent dash of Raheel Sharif to Beijing certainly indicates there is a problem. As to the need to formalize the defence and security arrangement with China through a written agreement, where is the need when the Pakistani military has almost made the country China's greater vassal. With centre of gravity of future conflict veering towards the India Ocean Region and Gwadar offered on plate to China to dominate the mouth of the Persian Gulf, any written agreement is superfluous.

One is reminded of the Shamsi Airfield which was leased to the US by Pakistan but had US had to vacate it in 2011 because of the uproar over sovereignty. What about Pakistan's sovereignty now with PLA already sitting in Pakistan's drawing room? Clearly, trumpeting the transit route linking Chabahar Port with Afghanistan a security threat to Pakistan is either a self inflicted phobia or deflecting from: keeping the military in control of Pakistan; diverting public attention from the real problems and instability within Pakistan; strengthening the China-Pakistan nexus while the world is out to discuss fall-outs of the China-Pakistan-North Korea nexus and why China helped turn these countries nuclear, and; enable the military to continue its policy of terrorism.