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## PAKISTAN AND THE SINO-SOVIET THAW

After years of refusal to discuss the Chinese 'obstacles', the Soviets have finally agreed to negotiate Beijing's conditions for rapprochement i.e., Soviet troops in Afghanistan, Soviet support for Vietnamese military occupation of Kampuchea, and the Soviet military concentration along the Sino-Soviet border. This development seems a major Soviet concession to the People's Republic of China. The recent positive Soviet signals for peace in Asia and strong desire to solve the simmering Afghan conflict, appear to have contributed in mitigating the Sino-Soviet mutual suspicion and fear on the political level.

The visible signs of Sino-Soviet detente over the horizon, do indicate that they can no longer afford to confront each other in the contemporary fast changing and competitive world order. The promise of Sino-Soviet thaw seems to be bearing both unexpected benefits and reprisals for those actors, directly or indirectly, linked with their mutual disputes, bitter relations, and ideological contentions.

Change in the erstwhile rigid positions of both China and the Soviet Union and their penchant to dent sharp edges of mutual rift, no doubt, will have tremendous impact on the foreign policies of countries like Pakistan. Ever since the middle of 1950 Pakistan has figured importantly and played a pivotal role in the super powers policies in Asia and the Middle East. Even in the current strategic milieu, the stakes of the super powers in Pakistan's immediate neighbourhood are undeniably very great. If the United States considers

Pakistan as 'a frontline state' against the projected Soviet expansionism in the Gulf region, the Soviet Union views it a gateway to the Indian Ocean. However, the Chinese look at Pakistan as a strategic window opening towards the Middle East and the Arabian Sea littoral states.

Besides, discussing the imperatives of Sino-Soviet rapprochement, this article seeks to analyse how and why Pakistan should be ready and willing to adjust and readjust its foreign policy formulations in accordance with emerging trends in Asia.

### Sino-Soviet Rift

The Sino-Soviet relations have been corroded by almost a quarter century of bitter hostilities in the spheres of their foreign policies, mutual territorial disputes and ideological contentions. The Sino-Soviet normal relations ran into difficulties at the end of 1950s, and Beijing confronted both Moscow and Washington in the 1960s and tried to build friendship with the developing countries in Asia and Africa. However, the Chinese could not succeed in their bid to create a new centre of power comprising essentially those of Afro-Asian actors. So as to benefit from cooperative interaction in the international system, the Chinese "began to open up to the rest of the world. This was a period of reconciliation with the US, Japan and West Europe in order to gain their help in China's policy of opposition to Soviet 'hegemonism' and to drive for rapid moderation".<sup>1</sup>

From the American point of view, China could be propped up as an ally to counter-balance the Soviet influence in Asia and capture Chinese market for reaping enormous economic benefits. On the other hand, by seeking cooperation of the West, the Chinese, however, wanted to expand and diversify their foreign policy interaction. Yet they never neglected or excluded the prospects of detente with the USSR. With the assumption of contacts between China and the

1. Hasan Askari Rizvi, "Sino-US Relations: An Appraisal", *The Muslim* (Islamabad), 30 July, 1985.

US, the former "took care not to be reduced to the position of a pawn in Americas anti-Soviet policies".<sup>2</sup> A pointer to such an assertion could be the declaration of the 12th Party Congress in Beijing which maintained that the People's Republic of China would follow an independent foreign policy and would not entangle itself in the US-USSR global rivalry.

### Signs of Thaw

Beginning of a possible upturn in the Sino-Soviet relations was evident at the funeral of the late Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko when there was (for the first time in many years) a party-to party representation between the two Communist giants. At the same time and after lapsing of two and a half decade since their split in the 1950s, the Chinese acknowledged rather publicly that the USSR were a socialist country.<sup>3</sup> Since then there have been conciliatory moves between the two countries. Among the latest initiatives, trade and development cooperation agreement figures high. From the past economic relations, the Sino-Soviet trade in the next five years might touch US\$ 2 billion target.

At present, both the Soviets and the Chinese appear to be willing to go along despite they face irritants in their mutual relations. However, it might take some time before the USSR and the PRC move to re-establish formal diplomatic ties. It is 'unrealistic to expect a sudden blossoming of friendship between the two' because in 'China's eyes the Soviet Union is still a hegemonistic power with which a cosy relationship of the 1950s is unthinkable'.<sup>4</sup>

However, contrary to the political forecasts by some American experts that 'there won't be a February 1972 in Sino-Soviet relations'

2. *ibid.*

3. In the past, the Chinese used to characterise the Soviet Union imperialist', 'hegemonist,' reckless and treacherously expansionist power. They used to prescribe a united front of all forces against hegemonism and offensive of the USSR.

4. See *The Muslim*, 2 October, 1983.

and 'no Soviet Kissinger will appear in Beijing'; it seems from the signals on both sides that they might be calling each other friends in the near future. Such a breakthrough is bound to alarm the West, which has tended to see China as a strategic ally against the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

The road to Sino-Soviet detente is paved with their mutual intentions and political compulsions. They claim to desire normalisation, even if they see different pitfalls i.e. the Afghan crisis, the Soviet bases in Vietnam, mutual territorial disputes, Sino-American relations etc. Friendly overtures on both sides, and their willingness to talk to each other at various levels are the reasons to believe that Moscow and Beijing are making progress in reducing their misperception and mutual tensions. If an alliance of expedience with a capitalist America is allowable in China's policy, then an equally expedient alliance/rapprochement with the neighbouring socialist giant, the USSR, cannot be ruled out altogether—especially on the assumption that capitalism is the enemy of socialism. It is the kernel of timeless truth that relations among nations are not fixed, and in Asia China can twist affairs in the most unusual way—as she did in the early 1970s.

### 'Ifs and Buts' and Pakistan

Sino-Soviet moves to normalise their relations will have significant bearing in the sub-continent and the Middle East. As the political milieu between Beijing and Moscow has already started registering subtle changes, the existing bonds and diplomatic equations among three countries of Pakistan, the PRC and the USA would definitely require readjustments.

If Sino-Soviet differences are settled, and their lingering confrontation slackened, Pakistan's posture and policy on the Afghan crisis is bound to be affected. If Sino-Soviet rapprochement materialises,

5. Alexander Macleod, "Soviets Play the China Card", *The Muslim*, 5 September, 1986.

See also Harvey Stockwin, "Sino-Soviet Relations" *The Indian Express*, 4, March, 1987.

and Pakistani decision-makers grasp its essentials then Chinese might apply their possible influence with the Soviets to avoid any collision

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course with Pakistan. Sino-Soviet improved relations will also provide impetus to normalisation of Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistan relations.

In the part, Pakistan-Soviet relations have been affected by extraneous factors i.e., 'old friends' of Moscow and Islamabad.<sup>6</sup> In Pakistan's case it is the USA and in the Soviet case, the Indians. The Soviets have tended to look at Pakistan through the Indian eyes and Islamabad looked through the biased spectacles of Washington, it is thus no accident that both have flawed perceptions and faltered at crucial times'.<sup>7</sup>

Resumption of 30 years of lost Sino-Soviet friendship and end of widely-billed 'China card' era will force the United States to make new alignments in Asia against its rival power, the Soviet Union. As the United States has no hesitation in conceding or supporting India's regional hegemonic ambitions, Washington might bring Japan and India together or might prop them up individually for their bigger role in Asia. If India does not fall in line with the US Asia policy, Washington might, atleast, favour Pakistan-Japan alignment. In any new power equation, the US does not seem in a mood to give up Pakistan rather easily, need not mention Washington's unhesitancy to sacrifice its 'most-allied ally' for the sake of seeking Indian company.

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6. Mushahid Hussain, "Why Moscow still Hopes for a Deal with Pakistan?"  
*The Nation* (Lahore), 17 June, 1987.

7. *ibid.*

Despite American willingness to please India, New Delhi also seeks the Soviet support to achieve regional primacy. India has developed enough political and military clout of its own to throw its weight around, which it already is doing, in dealings with Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh; but it will not be satisfied until it has subdued Pakistan, without which it feels, its hegemony will not be indisputably established".<sup>8</sup> However, in the face of emerging favourable trends and developments for its foreign policy considerations in Asia, the Soviets will not 'get involved in India's petty squabbles with China or Pakistan' because they have already sent signals of goodwill and reconciliation to their fellow Asian countries including Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

Only beginning with Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech in July 1986, the Soviets are trying to build bridges with China, Pakistan and Iran to eradicate American influence in the region. They realise that their Afghanistan and Vietnam policy has not earned them good reputation in the Third World. And that for the realisation of Moscow's earlier proposals on the Asian Collective Security System (now Asia-Pacific Security), the Soviet involvement in any regional conflict will end such prospects, besides sending wrong signals to Chinese.

### Sino-Pakistan Relations

The Chinese hold impressive political advantage in most areas of Asia except India and Vietnam. And in South Asia, they have built a model friendship with Pakistan. Unlike Americans, and the Soviets the Chinese have refrained from needling Pakistan. China has played a significant role in fulfilling Pakistan's defence needs prior to 1981-82. Pakistan's military capabilities continue to erode as a result of the US off and on arms embargoes and military aid-cuts. China provided Pakistan arms when the US and other Western sources refused to do so for political reasons—thus proving

8. Ghani Eirabie, "The Future of Pak-Soviet Relations : the Indian Dimension", *The Nation*, 5 January, 1987.

9. *ibid.*

a backbone of Pakistan's defence requirements. One could list the Sino-US divergence on Pakistan in the following :

- China's commitment to Pakistan's security seems a constant factor in Beijing's foreign policy formulations in Asia. The US commitments to Pakistan's security have vacillated with Washington's changing priorities and interests in Asia;
- China's Pakistan policy is based on the regional and neighbourhood considerations. On the other hand, Washington's Pakistan policy is founded from its global interests and considerations;
- Whereas the US pressurises Pakistan to seek detente with India in the sub-continent, the Chinese have never adopted such an onerous approach, and instead often appreciate Islamabad's perspectives vis-a-vis New Delhi;
- The United States has taken a tough stand on Pakistan's acquisition of nuclear technology, the Chinese never maligned Islamabad on this issue, and rather tend to oppose the Western discriminatory policy against Pakistan.

However, the ongoing Sino-Pakistan relations are acceptable to the United States,<sup>10</sup> because of the following :

- to avoid Indian outcries against any massive American aid to Pakistan;
- to accommodate Islamabad's own reluctance to appear re-aligned exclusively with Washington;
- to enable Pakistan to meet its urgent arms needs from other sources as well;
- Pakistan's current foreign and security perspective coincide with those of the PRC and the USA;
- the PRC and USA have found Pakistan as a willing party in their disputes/contentions vis-a-vis the USSR;
- Both endorse and support Pakistan's on-going policy on Afghanistan.

10. Some of these points were mentioned in the *Dawn* (Karachi), 1 August, 1980 in a feature: "Sino-US Strategy to Strengthen Pakistan's Security".

For the Chinese, Pakistan's existing strategic situation is extremely useful for their political/diplomatic openings/influence in the conservative Muslim countries. China's geographic proximity and reliable friendship with Pakistan logically accords Beijing a wider role to play in the South and Central Asia. As long as the Sino-Indian disputes are not settled and normal relations restored, Pakistan stands, in the Chinese perspective, a counter-weight to India. In contrast to two super powers perspective on Pakistan, the PRC alone would like to see a militarily strong, politically stable and an economically viable Pakistan.

### **Pakistan-Soviet Relations**

Relations between Pakistan and the Soviet Union most of the time, have never been normal. The Soviets have never considered Pakistan a friend, yet a willing agent of what is popularly known as 'the American imperialism'. In the last four decades, the Soviet policy towards Pakistan, at best, could be described as that of 'carrot and stick'. Whenever a possibility of Pakistan-Soviet improved relations emerged, the Soviets urged Pakistan to sever ties both with China and the United States. The positive, productive and fruitful period in Pakistan-Soviet relations was 1966-70, yet in this short span of time, the Soviets constantly urged Pakistan to join the Asian Collective Security System—an arrangement directed against the Chinese and American interests in Asia. Later on, Pakistan's secret arrangements for Henry Kissinger's visit to Beijing aroused the Soviet concerns over what was perceived to be a shift in the balance of power in favour of the USA, and of course, irritated by Pakistan's role that the Soviet Union adopted a revengeful attitude towards Islamabad in the 1970s.

At present, the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan has given birth to an extraordinary geo-strategic challenge to Pakistan's territorial integrity. Despite admitting their military intervention 'a mistake', it would be a gross miscalculation to depict the Soviets as 'bleeding' in Afghanistan or as 'losing' to Afghan Mujahideen. Indeed, it is Pakistan



which faces an acute security dilemma : internally the Afghan refugees pose high risks to its national security, and externally, the Soviet's

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'easily-inferable displeasure' could place unpleasant strains on its integrity.

The current security predicament in the region has led many to argue that Pakistan should accept the reality of Soviet control of Afghanistan and avoid pressures and pulls to its security by Moscow and its friend, India. However, Pakistan would not guarantee its security by capitulations to the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan nor by complete identification with the US interests in region. If Pakistan continues to entertain a close strategic relationship with the United States, the Soviet Union cannot hope to make a headway in the directions of her foreign policy. The two super powers' regional policies on Pakistan are divergent in the following context :

- \* The US would like Pakistan to serve as a bastion of anti-Sovietism—a frontline scenario. Consequently the Americans are averse to any solution on Afghanistan—favouring the USSR.
- \* The Soviet Union is keen for her extrication/exclusion from the Afghan quandary. Moscow supports a compromise solution of the simmering conflict—not favouring the United States.
- \* The US would be keen to see the Peoples Republic of China playing the anti-Soviet game—such a posture coincides with the American interests. Washington favours and would like Sino-Indian normalisation.

- \* The Soviet Union is against the Chinese perspectives on South Asia and would like to blunt the sharp edges of Sino-Soviet conflict.
- \* Whereas the United States is in search of base facilities and ground monitoring stations in the region, the Soviet Union looks askance to such developments.

Certainly it is not in Pakistan's interest to follow the extreme contrasts of super powers regional politics. However, it is better to forge normal relations with the Soviet Union on the philosophy of bilateralism and try to avoid any head-on-collision with the neighbouring giant for the sake of an unreliable distant super power. If the Americans and the Europeans could continue to trade and establish commercial links, hold summitries and find solutions of grave problems facing them, why could not a country like Pakistan solve its differences with Moscow and other neighbours including Afghanistan. Additionally, if incumbent Sino-Soviet rapprochement materialises, then Pakistan could enjoy a solid support of the two Asian giants to its integrity.

### **Balancer—the Third Road**

In the last thirty years the Chinese have swiftly moved from a common front alongwith the USSR to a united front with the USA—thus denying themselves the existence of a third road. But now they seem to be moving on the third road too, that is, it would be policy of equidistance in Beijing's relations with Moscow and Washington. From the contemporary trends in internatioal politics, it seems that three big actors i.e. the USA, the USSR and the PRC, are basically antagonistic to one another; each trading on the dislikes of the others. Among the three, China is a variant/independent actor in the drama of complex global relations. In this triangular relationship, Beijing can either play the role of a balancer, or at best, can swing the balance to one side only.

However, the Chinese strategy of anti-hegemonial alliance, first directed against the USA and the USSR, like a transformation scene

in pantomime, might adopt a balance-of-power approach—directed against neither of the two super powers but a useful complementary mechanism to maximise Beijing's national security and economic interests.

### **Juxtaposition**

So as to juxtapose their overtures with the Chinese signals, the Soviets have decided to make a fresh start in their relations with the Asian countries—the centrepiece of Moscow's *ostpolitik* would be detente with Beijing. Like Chinese, the Soviets do face economic, political and military compulsions, that is, to thin out Soviet troops concentration along the Sino-Soviet sprawling border and settle the Afghan and Kampuchean crises. The Soviet concessions on the three issues will substantially ease out the Chinese tensions and fears of Soviet cordon sanitaire. Besides the three 'obstacles', so as to avert excessive reliance on the United States, the Chinese do intend to reap political and economic dividends of being closer to the USSR. American pressures on Japan to undertake a bigger military role in the Asia-Pacific region, and characterisation of China by some Western quarters as 'an unreliable partner' are indications that the west does perceive the Sino-Soviet thaw, and that too not in distant future. Additionally, the Chinese in their rhetorics, no longer emphasize general line of co-belligerence with the United States to roll the Soviets, from Afghanistan, back to the Oxus.

### **Conclusion**

When a fundamental development takes place in international affairs, it affects both the friends and adversaries. Every actor tries to adjust its foreign policy in such a way that the new development might not hurt it. Therefore, on its part, Pakistan should not take the emerging trends in Sino-Soviet relations for granted, nor ignore the existing ties both with the USA and the PRC. By all available indications, the most crucial time in Pakistan's history is around the corner. Isolation and unconcern, or for that matter, adopting negative attitude on Islamabad's part in connivance with a distant super power, will definitely place extra strains on Pakistan's security dilemma.