



PRESENT GLOBAL POLITICAL RE-ALIGNMENT AND POSITIONING PAKISTAN IN IT: THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Neo-realism depicts history as a power based order coming from the great powers of one particular era. End of the Cold War has changed the global political landscape massively by replacing China as the leader of the second world order. Small states like Pakistan have to consistently re-align its foreign outlook accordingly. This article argues adopting 'Neutral Engagement' as a way forward for Pakistan vis-à-vis its close and historical relation with both China and USA.

Key words: World Politics, China-US Relations, Pak-US, Pak-China, Pakistan's Foreign Policy

1. The End of History: Delayed

The end of the Cold War had raised immense interest among the theoreticians of International Relations to predict the future to come. The debate ranged from a pure Liberal triumphalism to the pessimistic approach of the Realists that declared return of the realpolitik to the prediction of the danger of anarchism. Francis Fukuyama in his famous thesis predicted the 'End of History' as the final and ultimate destination of human aspiration culminating in the individual centric and rule-based world of the Liberalism (Fukuyama, 2012). Can humans desire more than liberty, recognition and prosperity? With the demise of the Soviet Union, the world was ready for embracing the liberal ideas entirely. Samuel P. Huntington (1996), a US policy thinker, indicated the presence of religions as the last nuisances before the final destination is fully achieved. Realists, on the other side, were adamant on the unchanging nature of global politics where every state pursues its own interest defined as power (Mearsheimer, 2014). With the end of bipolarity called the Cold War, the world was poised to return to play classical game of realpolitik. Then, there were also some voices who warned about new



challenges like environment, population and poverty that it was a kind of end of world itself as now states may explode like bombs internally (Kaplan, 2001). Thirty years later in 2023, one can see the contours visible of the global politics. It is more a return of the old ideological battle that busied the world for last century. 'The return' and its unique features should be the concern of the academicians of international politics, now.

2. Global Re-alignment

The US-China rivalry contains the potential for a realignment of the world along ideological lines. It is a new cold war with the only change that this time China has taken the seat instead of Russia as the center of the other side (Allison, 2017). But, this change brings in massive differences in the game. First, location. China, unlike Russia, is a pure Asiatic country along the Pacific Ocean. Second, technological advancement makes the strategic maneuvering quite different from the Cold War era which now looks archaic. Third, presence of new players in the world is a daunting task before the two great rivals to deal with. Yet, there are some features that will guarantee that the old structure of the Cold War continue. First, the two main rivals – China and USA- are so massively weaponised and so rigid is the system of balance of power that the likelihood of a direct confrontation between the two is out of question (Will America and China go to war?, 2017). That means, second, as usual in a cold war, there will be more indirect and proxy style warfare in the future to come. Third, the above situation will necessitate both the actors to gather allies on its side which will be achieved on ideological lines. It means a return of 'values' in international politics. Here the likelihood of strict Cold War style ideological warfare is less expected for the sole reason that China is a shy leader of the world of ideas. It has refrained from spreading its version of the Communist ideological which the old Soviet Union loved to do in its time. It seems, as a conclusion, that it would be more a Great War (1906-1939) style of political alignment, where on the one side the 'Free World' devised a system of alliance all soaked on ideological line, and the other side was a conflagration of Authoritarian regimes of various ilk. In the absence of an ideological excitement, China will be left with the option to gather support on sharing mutual interest with other states and collecting all the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes of the world who are not easy with interventionist liberal order of the day. Some recent global activities can be taken as early signs of the return of this loose ideological international competition to come.

After the end of the Cold War, the two powers moved towards a policy of co-op than hostility making room for interdependence (US-China Relations, 2023); also called 'Co-competitive' or 'Cooperative Rivalry' policy by neo-liberals where free economic struggle remains within the bounds of recognised international security expectations (Nye, 2018). By 2005, US was ready to accept China's role in the world as a 'responsible stakeholder'. In 2008, China was the biggest creditor of the US economy. Interdependency was at its peak. China had become the second largest economy in 2010 with prediction of surpassing that of the US in two decades. Neo-liberals' sole reliance on interdependence for gaining mutual trust and harmony of interest had to be juxtaposed with the Neo-realist concern about the rise of a revisionist power in the system with different ideological roots. It was the



prevalence of the latter concern in the US thinking that in 2011, it announced its 'pivot to Asia' policy by trying to foment 'diplomatic, economic, strategic and otherwise [ties]- in the Asia-Pacific region' (Leiberthal, 2011, parenthesis added). In this regard, it announced its Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade programme with eight other countries. That year, it also announced to install marines in Australia. Interesting, in the years that followed it was economy and trade that became the boon of contention between the two erstwhile trade partners. Tit for tat sanctions and restrictions replaced free-agreements and interdependence.

2012 was an important date in the history of China as in its 18th National Party Congress nearly 70% of leadership changed, that included coming to power of Xi Jinping as the president of the country. Xi came up with his ambitious geo-economic project of Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, called One Belt, One Road (OBOR). The policy, now famously called, The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was an indicator of a major shift in Chinese cautious foreign outlook towards taking a greater engagement with the outside world. It was also an acceptance of the fact that the worsening ties with the US would ultimately necessitate China to build its own economic order, at least in its nearby regions, as Xi declared in 2013:

“Maintaining stability in China’s neighbourhood is the key objective of peripheral diplomacy. We must encourage and participate in the process of regional economic integration, speed up the process of building up infrastructure and connectivity. We must build the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, creating a new regional economic order” (Xi Jinping’s Important Speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference”, 2013).

The US 'Pivot to Asia' had received its response. The ensuing years saw intensifying tension ranging from tariffs, Hong Kong, Taiwan and spying. US Secretary of State Mark Anthony Pompeo delivered a speech in 2020 that contains ideological underpinnings. Titled as “Communist China and the Free World’s Future”, the speech also had these lines,

“Look, we have to admit a hard truth. We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won’t get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it.” (Pompeo, 2020)

The speech compares to the speeches of Truman during the start of the Cold War. It clearly expresses the end or exhaustion of the co-op policy. Relation had worsened during the Trump presidency, but the Biden administration seems to retain the tone and direction of the predecessor.

In a significant move, NATO in 2021 declared China as a threat. It posed “China’s stated ambitions and assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas



relevant to alliance security.”(Brussels Summit Communiqué, 2021) It was for the first time that a collective response had come from the allied powers against China. In 2022, the Biden administration explained its strategy vis-à-vis China based on ‘Three Pillars’, i.e., improving domestic competitiveness in industry, technology and infrastructure; aligning with allies; and, competing with China globally (Blinken, 2022, semicolons added). The US strategic focus on the Pacific further materialized with the formal formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2021 (What is QUAD, 2022). Formerly, it was a disaster management arrangement to cope with the destruction of the Tsunami in 2004. Comprising of US, Australia, Japan and India, QUAD encircles the Pacific together with the ideological underpinning that all the members are democratic states.

Chinese active role in international policy appeared in its diplomatic efforts to broker a peace-deal between Russia and Ukraine as the two have drawn into a stretched war. But, the real surprise came when China broke a deal between the erstwhile rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran, which resulted in ending Yemen conflict as well as allowing the two hostile countries to resume diplomatic relations. This was a massive ingress into a region thought deeply in the US sphere of influence. This diplomatic success coincided with the decision of the OPEC including Russia to increase the price of oil against the request of the West to the contrary. The Two states, i.e. , China and Saudi Arabia, have since diversified the number of topics of discussion ranging from Middle East security, oil trade to the situation in Afghanistan to name a few (Narayanan, 2022). The authoritative line up is evident. While, on the other side, the Japan hosted G-7 summit 2023 did not fail to showcase the collective potential of the liberal democratic powers. In an interview with CNN, the Saudi Foreign Minister quoted ease of dealing with China compared to the US as one of the causes for the Saudi orientation towards the East instead of West (Anderson, 2023). Whereas the West keeps an eye on the ‘human rights’ in the domestics of other states, China is least bothered about the internal affairs of a state- a boon for the authoritative regimes in the present global system.

3. Situating Pakistan

This is the present global environment which is developing fast around Pakistan. Being a small state in the global great power orders, it has to devise out its policies in response, ensuring both its security and viability. The situation grows even more serious with the fact that this time both the antagonist powers have deep clouts in Pakistan. The latter shares a long history of friendship- both strategic and otherwise- with US and China. Right at the beginning of the Cold War, Pakistan was one of the key states in the strategic calculus of the Western bloc against the Soviet Union (Kux, 2001). Since 1959, Pakistan received massive military support from the US, and was one of the founding members of the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO), and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO)-umbrella unions of likeminded states countering communist influences in their regions. Pakistan was also one of the beneficiaries of the US sponsored ‘Atom for Peace’ programme. Pakistan and Turkey had become the highest recipients of US assistance beyond the Marshall Plan that assisted post-war Europe. First joint exercise of strength was tested in the Afghan War in 1980’s that pitted the US allies against the Soviet forces in that fateful country, and Pakistan was the frontline state in it (Kux, 2001).



The Post Cold-war era allowed the return of liberal interventionism in the US policy over-riding its realistic interest for a while; which resulted in a near breakdown of relations between the two former allies till the 9/11 incident. The latter incident again pushed the core interests of the US control its foreign policy and its 'War on Terror' led to include Pakistan among its 'Non-NATO Ally' (Tellis, 2008). Since then the US led coalition had established its military presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the gateway to its Afghan policy till the final withdrawal of the US forces in 2021.

Pakistan and China established diplomatic relation in 1951, friendly gestures by the latter had overcome some initial hesitation the former showed as it had to digest the communist take-over of the latter (Burke, 1973). Real depth came with the historic visit of the Pakistan's foreign minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto to China in 1963 that concluded border agreements between the two. Friendship higher than the Karakoram and deeper than Indian Ocean had been established. Pakistan had played an important role in achieving 'Rapprochement' between the US and China in 1971. The liberalisation and rise of China after Deng Xiaoping (1976) consequently helped the US fight its last war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and that also gave an opportunity to Pakistan and China to sit together on strategic matters. An important road the Karakoram Highway (KKH) had already been made functional in 1978 between the two. True to the Chinese commitment of non-intervention in the domestics, the mutual relation between the two sides never felt any jolt, which has been a hallmark of Pak-US relation- a series of engagement and disengagement at various points of history. Ultimately, in 2013, both the countries signed 'Common Vision for Deepening China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era' that followed the much acclaimed construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that further widens the old KKH to align Chinese southern regions to Pakistan and beyond (Pakistan And China Diplomatic Relations, 2020). The Corridor is China's bid for the Middle East. As one writer assumes:

"This new more activist foreign policy has reinforced the impression that OBOR is primarily driven by broad geostrategic aims. Certainly some elements of OBOR are consistent with such a characterisation. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a prime example. It is widely regarded as one of the flagship projects of OBOR and is enthusiastically supported by both Beijing and Islamabad. The proposed corridor is expected to connect Kashgar in Xinjiang in China's far west with the Port of Gwadar in the province of Baluchistan. Given the port's proximity to the Persian Gulf, it could be used as a transshipment point for China's energy supplies obviating the need to go through the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia" (Cai, 2017).

In 2015, Xi visited Pakistan and signed more than fifty agreements in energy, infrastructure and development.

4. Way Forward: Neutral Engagement

One can easily sense that whereas the US is in its disengagement phase towards Pakistan after its



Afghan withdrawal, there is a consistent growth of mutual cooperation between Pakistan and China. This brings this research article to its ultimate question: what if the US starts a re-engagement policy with Pakistan in the context of its present global competition with China? This question demands further refinement of the problem in the context of Pakistan. Firstly, Pakistan has enjoyed good relations with both the great powers without provoking the other. As the above history of relations evidenced, it has masterfully engaged both sides at one time in both geo-economic and geo-strategic sectors. But, one fact is pressing. The Cold War era of ease has gone in this triangular relation. Now, China has replaced Russia as the centre of the second order. What if any friendly move by Pakistan towards any of the two sides is noticed more anxiously by the other side, as the two rivals grow sensitive towards each other? Second, China's inroad towards the Middle East increases Pakistan's importance for the global stability of the Chinese order. The two oil depots i.e. Saudi Arabia and Iran, will have to be transported through Pakistan to reach the pumps of China. What will be the consequences of a counter-move by the US to disrupt the Chinese Middle East ambitions? In the presence of the above two situations, what if the influencing and counter-balancing acts of the two powers bring Pakistan in the lime light? The worst case scenario would be east-ward shifting of the Afghanistan situation, which was the west ward battle field between US and the USSR during the past. In a less dramatic scenario, how best Pakistan would be able to sustain pressures from the global powers to mold the latter's policies towards its own core interests when it effects those of the others? Hereon, Pakistan will be left with two policy options: taking side, or staying neutral. The first alternative will land Pakistan into the eye of the storm. It will demand further two policy choices: either completely aligning with the 'free bloc' or be a part of the 'authoritarian lineup'. The second option entails 'neutral engagement' that advises finding a safe place and wait for the storm to pass (Burki, 2022). Without analyzing in detail the benefits and repercussions of the first policy option, this article suggests adopting the second alternative as the best in the context of the present situation of Pakistan. Adopting the second option entails bringing about a basic change in the orientation of Pakistan's foreign. As this article argues, the present global politics more reminisce the WW1 and 2 alliance formation. It also claims there is and will be more and more grouping of states based on their loose political systems i.e. democracy and authoritarianism. And its last assumption is that Pakistan wants to strike balance between the two competing sides. To achieve this end, Pakistan must pursue three courses of actions that positively affect its foreign policy objectives.

First, Pakistan must continue and strengthen its credential as a liberal democratic state. Since, it enjoys a deep and long-term commitment with China, this credential is the ultimate balancing act. If the world bifurcates sharply along political systems, Pakistan has a functioning democracy to engage with the West and physical proximity to move with the East. Pakistan can be a part of the 'Free world' with strong ties with China. Second, practically pressures from the Western side will come- if it comes- along Pakistan's relation towards India, which is all drawn into the QUAD process. Since, Indo-China rivalry will be the practical shape of this loose ideological competition in South Asia, easing out relation with India will be the real balancing act Pakistan can play at this moment. The recent boycott from Saudi Arabia to participate in G-20 conference in Indian Kashmir is an early sign of the turn of events to come. It seems Pakistan realizes the importance of this balancing act as evident



from its decision to send Bilawal Bhutto, Foreign Minister, to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to India in May 2013. As expected, the activity did not result in any breakthrough for the two rival counties. India extended cold shoulder because right now it lacks any big incentive to engage with Pakistan. The latter's domestic political instability and economic melt-down further removes urgency from Indian side (Shams, 2023). But these are the exact reasons why Pakistan should try to neutralise its relations with its eastern neighbor, without losing hope at the early diplomatic hurdles. Diplomacy needs time. Thirdly, Pakistan should tap all the opportunities the present order, especially, Chinese inroads towards Middle East provides. Neutral engagement would mean diversifying trade and economic relations without increasing strategic responsibilities. The energy starved economy of Pakistan will benefit from the oil rich Middle East, and its cash deficient institutions will need the global financial institutions of the West, to grease the wheel. Neutral engagement is the key.

Conclusion

The world is getting divided along a loose ideological system. The US and China are ready to take the lead of the two rival divisions. A realignment of the liberal democratic states on one side, and those of the non/less liberal states on the other, has a more affinity with the world political landscape that prevailed before the Cold War. Smaller states, as usual, will be at the receiving end, having to choose between 'with us or with them' dilemma. A state like Pakistan will have to be more cautious in dealing with this situation as it shares strong and deep relations with the two antagonist group leaders. It should try to stay neutral- as much as possible- by diversifying its relations with the members of both the camps, along economic and trade sectors.



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