

PAKISTAN FOREIGN POLICY DIRECTIONS TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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INTRODUCTION OF FOREIGN POLICY

The foreign policy of a country is the product of the interaction of many factors: historical, cultural, ideological, economic and geopolitical. These factors determine the country's outlook on world affairs. According to Lord Palmerston, "in international relations there can be no eternal friends nor there can be eternal enemies. The only thing eternal is the national interest".¹ In this light, a foreign policy can be thought of as the key element in the flow process by which state translates its broadly conceived goals into concrete courses of action for securing the national interests.

PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Historically, Pakistan's foreign policy has been mainly determined by two factors i.e. security and development. Though the threat perceptions have been changing according to circumstances, its security has remained the corner stone of its foreign policy because of its peculiar geopolitical situation and historical background. Pakistan used to share common borders with two big powers, Russia and China, and two hostile neighbours, India and Afghanistan.²

In the year 1991, an important development in the north west of Pakistan occurred when the Soviet empire virtually collapsed and independent Central Asian Muslim republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan emerged. This development opened a new vista of cooperation at inter Islamic level. Pakistan became the first country to recognize all these six Muslim republics.³

RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia or "Sheridan Asia" in Russian language is one of the important regions of the world in terms of strategic location and historical richness. It has vast potentials of oil, gas and other minerals. It is also believed to have vast land reservoirs of grain and food stuff having the source capacity of satisfying the growing want and hunger the world over.⁴ The proximity of such an important area to Pakistan's northern borders augers very well for the economic well being and prosperity of Pakistan as well. Apart from that, Pakistan serves as a conduit to the flow of goods and material from that region as it offers port facilities of Karachi to those land-locked states. Pakistan is, in fact, the link between these states through important trading routes. These include the ancient silk route, which was for long the conduit for all incoming and outgoing caravans laden with spices and other stuff from undivided India and many valuable items including silk, porcelain and other goods of high artistic value passed out to the rich markets of Khorasan, Baghdad, Cairo and beyond. This strategic element is of great importance to Pakistan and the Central Asian states and it always figures prominently in its foreign affairs.

As a matter of fact, Central Asia was a life line for our land route commerce to Russia and Europe at a time when the region was open to world markets. The route remained open upto the beginning of the 20th century. It is this commercial activity that brought the people and rulers of central Asia closer to our land and this contact roped in the people of the two areas into common political and cultural activities.

Besides geographical proximity and economic potentials of the region from the steppes of Kazakhstan to

the Arabian Sea and from the Caspian to the mouth of the Indus, the region is also a sort of cultural zone where people share common religion and, ethnic history and they have interacted with each other for a long time. However, the entire area has actually been one great economic zone. It is characterized by free trade and free movement of people. All over this region from Lahore to Kazan on the volga and from Baku to Multan, one witness the presence of caravan serais reminiscent of the old trade routes and large scale business. The inflow of merchants, artisans and craftsmen to the city of Lahore in the medieval period changed the whole complexion of urban life. Paper manufacture, wood carving, types of copper vessels made in Pakistan, many kinds of gold and jewelry design, the tailoring profession and dresses and many other customs observed in the Pakistani society exhibit the deep imprint of the cultural life of Central Asian people. The traditional dastarkhwan of Central Asia and Pakistan have common adab and common dishes matching with other social behavior. In fact, the commonness can also be noticed in dress, music and musical instruments. Though the closing of the ancient trading houses snapped the contacts, yet the old surviving marks at the two ends vividly recall the deep historical links among them since times immemorial.⁵

Pakistan has always been very keen to promote friendly political, social, economic and cultural ties with the neighbouring Muslim countries, specially with the independent Central Asian republics because one of our important strategic objectives in this region has been the promotion of a cohesive political, economic and security order.⁶

In this context, we may refer to the statement of A.H.Baloch. He said, "Pakistan wants to have good

relations with Central Asian countries, based on the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference in each other's internal affairs and mutual benefits" while it has no intention to "use Islamic, historical or cultural cards in seeking to guide our foreign policy".⁷

The break-up of the Soviet Union and emergence of many independent republics instantly stressed the need for opening diplomatic and trade offices and promoting trade ties. As such, leather goods and textile goods flooded the Central Asian markets. Again travel restrictions for Central Asian travelers were eased so that the businessmen and tourists of these countries could easily visit Pakistan. However, the key component for significant cooperation between Pakistan and these republics remains the offer to build a trans-Asian railway track and a highway through Balochistan.⁸ Pakistan therefore hosted an E.C.O. conference at Quetta for developing the communication and cultural network with these countries and development of rail road facilities on the Pakistan's side of the border. Unfortunately the continuing intra Afghan fighting had sapped its initiative toward that direction, otherwise Pakistan's foreign policy initiatives would have successfully outwitted the Indians who were shrewd enough in establishing deeper contacts in Uzbekistan and Kazakistan since very beginning.

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif while addressing E.C.O. countries at the Ashkabad Summit held in May 1992, said: "We intend to play our fullest role to develop the Central Asian republics, and to help our brothers in this region. Our relations with you are historical in the field of foreign, culture, and other human activities which have benefited the region in the past".⁹

In the on going struggle for power and legitimacy in Afghanistan, Pakistan recognizes the Taliban's as the legitimate government. Under the leadership of Mulla Muhammad Umar, the Taliban control nearly 3/4 of Afghan state. The rest is under the hold of Tajak leader Ahmed Shah Masood and his shia allies Hizab-a-wahdat who are fully backed and supported not only by the clerical regime at Tehran but also by the Uzbekes and the Russians.¹⁰ Although Pakistan favours a broad based dialogue between the belligerents, yet the very fact that it has accorded diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime in Kabul which has annoyed the Rabani group and its supporters in Iran to such an extent that stalemate continues unabated, while no amount of negotiations have in any way helped in easing the situation on the diplomatic front.

TAJIKISTAN

Though largely unnoticed and undocumented, Pakistan played an important role in arranging ceasefire between the communists and the Islamists in Tajikistan. In this context, both Russia and Pakistan are actively coordinating their diplomatic activities for the sole purpose of bringing peace to this wartorn land-locked country.

AZERBAIJAN - AMERICAN CONFLICT

The conflict between these two states has been given proper attention by Pakistan. It has always called for resolution of the Nagorno Kala Bagh enclave issue as a matter needing bilateral settlement among these two neighbouring states.¹¹

CHINA

Pakistan and China have always enjoyed close relations. So much so that the persecution of the Higher Turks in the republic of sinkering did not move the

Pakistani foreign office at all. The media reports regarding large scale executions of Muslim freedom fighters in that area were very diplomatically ignored fearing that taking notice of it would impair the relations and it wouldn't have served Pakistan's interests. The same policy subsists towards the affairs of the Russian Federation. Thus the unilateral declaration of freedom by Chechenya was not acceptable to Pakistan. Pakistan regards Russian sovereignty as inviolable and it has refused to be drawn in the conflict although it was pressurized by some religions and quasi religious groups to take a critical stand on the issue. Pakistan, however, did not find it worthwhile to disturb its close friendship with Russia and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Pragmatism has been the order of the day and it fully governs Pakistan's foreign policy towards that region.¹²

Here, one may also refer to the statement of Pakistan's former head of the government, Benazir Bhutto. She declared in her speech in April 1994 at the German Bundestag that "Asia, as far as Pakistan is concerned, our interest in Central Asia is abiding and occupies a place of top priority in our foreign policy agenda. Pakistan is not just a South Asian country. By virtue of its geographic location and by virtue of our close historical and cultural ties with the world of Islam to the west, Pakistan also enjoys a privileged position in relations to Central Asian republics and the middle east. We are linked with Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and the states of Central Asia in E.C.O. which provides frame work of great potential in stimulating economic exchanges and in fostering political understanding among member states".¹³

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless and despite deep historical contacts

between Central Asia and Pakistan, recent history has spread a veneer over this long historical connection to such an extent that the immediate neighbours have forgotten their age-old relations - relations that loosened one end of the must with the departure of the British from the subs-continent. The other end remained tied to its own system. As such, while Pakistan is seeking to discover its historic roots, the perception of its historic identity is blurred as the cultural links are shrouded behind the dark curtains of recent development. Today Central Asia seems to be a part of another world, and its perception of the past and future remains obscure. It is yet to rediscover its Muslim identity and Islamic credentials.

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