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Pakistan Loses Utility in United States Strategic Calculus 2018

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Strategic utility of a smaller nation to that of a major power lies in its credibility, usefulness and loyal effectiveness to serve the national security interests of its strategic patron and that in case of Pakistan seems to have faded as far as the United States is concerned with Pakistan having decidedly opting for the China-Pakistan Axis.

Pakistan had for decades back opted for China as its strategic patron in preference to the United States but went through the façade of a staunch American ally while double-timing the United States over Afghanistan. Successive US Presidents were aware of it in this century but both the United States and Pakistan let political expediencies to prevail. In case of Pakistan Army, the decision-maker of Pakistan's foreign policy, a 'Hedging Strategy' against the United States was necessary till its alternatively preferred strategic patron China emerged more powerful enough to challenge US power and influence.

For the United States, I believe, Pakistan hosting China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Gwadar Port was proof enough that Pakistan had strategically fled the American coop. China's increasing siding of Pakistan over Afghanistan and Pakistan's lack of sincerity to reciprocate US military aid which was Afghanistan-centric by seriously serving US interests possibly has led to United States final denouement with Pakistan.

Pakistan defiantly ignoring United States repeated advisories to Pakistan in 2017 to reign in Pakistan Army terrorist affiliates inflicting havoc on Afghanistan's security to the detriment of US national interests seems to have led the Trump Administration to the conclusion that Pakistan and the Pakistan Army have ceased to be useful assets in the American strategic calculus.

Pakistan in 2018 finally seems to have lost its relevance and credibility in United States strategic calculus after decades of its centrality in US policy formulations on South Asia and this in my assessment should not be read as related only to US frustrations with Pakistan's Afghanistan related policies but also to Pakistan's geopolitical pivot to China-Pakistan –Russia Trilateral as a follow-up to the China-Pakistan Axis.

Pakistan Army in recent past seems to have read geopolitics wrongly by a policy pivot to the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral oblivious to the fact that both China and Russia were earlier perceived as inimical to US security and in National Security Strategy 2017 issued by President Trump, China and Russia have virtually been designated as adversarial to the United States national security, power and influence,

Pakistan Army therefore in 2018 has placed Pakistan in the camp of United States military adversaries both in terms of the Afghanistan issue and also in terms of global geopolitics of balance of power.

It is for nothing that China continues to block in the United Nations the designation of Pakistani terrorist leader Jaish-e-Mohamed Chief as a global terrorist. It was nothing that China was the only nation maintaining links with the Taliban regime in Kabul and thereafter. It was China's quid-pro-quo payments to Pakistan Army for furthering China's national security interests in South Asia at the expense of both India earlier and now the United States more pointedly.

Pakistan Army's ingenuity for inventing its strategic utility to the United States seems to have finally run out in 2018 as with no time lines to achieve results in Afghanistan by US Forces, the United States is not hustled into short-term politically expedient dependence on Pakistani lines of communication to sustain US presence in Afghanistan.

United States-Pakistan relations as 2018 commences seemed to have nose-dived as reflected in US President Trump's first tweet of 2018 accusing Pakistan of having given United States "nothing but lies and deceit, thinking that our leaders as fools" and this despite that the United States had pumped into Pakistan \$ 33 billion over the last 15 years.

The United States admonishments to Pakistan Army to do more in terms of not destabilising Afghanistan's stability have been rebuffed by Pakistan dismissively saying that it cannot do anything more. More defiantly the Pakistan Army spokesperson, a Lieutenant General, warned the United States against any unilateral military intervention in Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan. It needs to be recalled that these Pakistan borderlands with Pakistan host the launch pads and safe havens of the terrorist groups and Haqqani Brothers creating havoc in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's relations with the United States have nose-dived after President Trump came into power and more especially from August 2017 onwards when the Trump Administration perceived that despite more than enough nudging by the United States for Pakistan to rein-in

Pakistan Army's affiliated terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, and specifically the Haqqani Brothers terrorist group. Pakistan Army had used these terrorist assets in the past deceitfully against US Forces and lately to devastating effect against US national security interests in restoring security and stability in Afghanistan.

Pakistan Army has not taken kindly to President Trump's new Afghanistan strategy enunciated in latter half of 2017 which not only embarks on limited UUS Forces surge in Afghanistan but also removes all time lines to achieve stability in Pakistan and ensuring that capacity building of Afghanistan security forces is effected to equip them to be more self-reliant in achieving stability and security.

United States recent declarations at the highest levels that the United States intends "to stay put" in Afghanistan till full security and stability is restored clashes directly with Pakistan Army's obsession to regain proxy control over Kabul through its terrorist affiliates and the Taliban and possibly other Islamic Jihadi groups.

Geopolitically, a number of developments goaded the Pakistan Army into pivoting to the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral in the recent past. This stood periodically reflected in my SAAG Papers on Afghanistan. The geopolitical developments which the Pakistan Army as the main policy decision-maker perceived as working against Pakistan's interest were (1) US-India Strategic Partnership growing more proximate and stronger (2) United States giving a stake to India in the future of Afghanistan both as reconstruction donor and also capacity-building of Afghan security forces (3) US recognition of India as a regional power and a global leading power with India's growing national power attributes.

Against the above geopolitical backdrop a number of questions emerge in relation to Pakistan's utility in the United States strategic calculus reading the strong pressures by the United States on the Pakistan Army to deliver in terms of not only stopping Pakistan-based terrorist groups operating against Afghanistan from Pakistani safe havens but also reining in and eradicating all terrorism operating from Pakistani soil, and that includes against India too.

Some of the more major questions that need to be examined are (1) Can Pakistan Army effectively resist US demands stated above? (2) Can Pakistan receive assistance from China and Russia in confronting the United States especially if the United States undertakes limited military operations against Pakistani terrorist havens in Pakistan's areas bordering Afghanistan? (3) Will Pakistan continue to be factored-in in the US strategic calculus in the years to come? (4) Can the United States logistically maintain its forces in Afghanistan; what are the options?

The question of Pakistan Army resisting US pressures to deliver on its demands is debatable. The Pakistan Army can continue to prevaricate in terms of results expected by the United States. The Pakistan Army going by past records can proceed on a double-game of rendition of some low-level terrorist to United States but keep dilly dallying on the Haqqani Brothers. The Pakistan Army hierarchy may acquiesce to a limited US military operation feigning ignorance and denying knowledge as it did during the raid to liquidate Osama bin Laden

deep within a Pakistan Army garrison.

Pakistan would be hard-pressed to resist US pressures as the military option of a limited operation is available to the United States. Also voices are surfacing within Pakistan that Pakistan Army manage Pakistan's relation with the United States with more wisdom than trenchant responses.

More importantly Pakistani economists have cautioned the Pakistani establishment not to annoy the United States rashly as American aid cut-offs in millions of dollars will seriously impact Pakistan's weak economy.

In the event of a United States limited military operation in Pakistani border areas with Afghanistan it is unlikely that China or Russia can openly assist Pakistan Army, other than condemnatory rhetoric. The past example of Osama bin Laden's liquidation by a limited Special Forces operation by the United States not drawing any substantial condemnation can be cited as example.

Pakistan will continue to be factored-in in US strategic calculus not as a strategic asset for the United States but as a nuclear state and a disruptive proxy of China. Pakistan Army hierarchy as per Pakistani columnists' are quoted as being distrustful of US motives and policies on Pakistan. It follows that Pakistan would be factored-in as a destabilising and disruptive factor in South Asia and US interests in South Asia.

The larger question that still lingers is as to what contingency plans the United States has for alternative logistics routes for US Forces in Afghanistan? If Pakistan continues to be recalcitrant the United States has many coercive options available extending from economic sanctions, isolating Pakistan and using strategic airlifts directly and indirectly to ensure that its military presence in Pakistan is not obstructed by Pakistan. Complete cut of US aid to Pakistan will be a potent weapon.

In conclusion, the United States needs to firmly resolve and ensure that Pakistan Army, the main bane of Pakistan is brought to order and made to submit to furtherance of United States national interests. Pakistan Army boxing much above its true strategic weight s needs to be put into place and Pakistan Army cut down to size by neutralising its perceived exaggerated support accruing from China's and Russia's pivots to Pakistan.

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