

Opinion

US-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: A New Alliance in Making?

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As we enter the next millennium in about a year from now, India will continue to be beset with a series of security problems. Some of them are well formulated and have their basis in the inertial cold war security-strategic order, while others are just beginning to crystallize in the wake of the nuclear tests in the South Asian region. The post-cold war relaxed strategic calculations are now fast yielding ground to serious strategic thinking on the part of the policy makers all around us. One of the most important strategic challenges that is emerging right now is the new type of US-Pakistan strategic partnership.

Changing Pattern of Strategic Alliance

This new strategic partnership between the United States and Pakistan could be qualitatively different from that of SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization)-type of alliance structure or the kind of partnership the two countries forged during the years of cold war armed conflict in the neighbouring Afghanistan. Although Pakistan had joined the SEATO to meet the so-called real or imagined threat from its bigger neighbour-India, such regional collective security alliances were aimed at countering the influence of the Communist countries and thus was of the little help for Pakistani-initiated wars against India in 1965 and 1971. Even the closer bilateral defence ties between the United States and Pakistan during the Cold War years were primarily aimed against the former Soviet Union to serve the American needs. As a result, notwithstanding its alliance relationship with Pakistan, the United States had imposed arms embargo against Pakistan, as against India, both during the 1965 War and the 1971 War in the Indian subcontinent.

But the emerging strategic ties between the United States and Pakistan in the post-Cold War setting and in the context of post-Chagai nuclear explosions would be unique in the world, as it would involve two nuclear powers- one de jure and the other de facto. While US-Israel relationship could look similar, Israel has neither declared itself as a Nuclear Weapon State nor has demonstrated its nuclear capability. Moreover, the new American strategic partnership with Pakistan would be more acceptable to the vast Islamic community of countries, unlike the US-Israel one, which is shunned by the Arab and the Muslim countries around the world.

It is true that the United States has closer strategic ties with other nuclear powers, such as Britain and France, but such ties come under a multilateral alliance system called North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Before the end of the Cold War, the US-French-British strategic cooperation under the NATO umbrella had a specific logic in countering the threat from the former Soviet Union. But

it was not an example of unequal relationship, despite US preponderance in the nuclear field. The Cold War logic of such alliances, moreover, is no longer relevant and ironically the German position on the first strike doctrine is leading to eventual irrelevance of US-French-British strategic cooperation, particularly in the nuclear field. Russia and China too have been seeking to forge closer strategic ties, but both are aware of the inherent limitations of their bilateral relationship.

The US-Pakistan strategic partnership may overcome all the difficulties faced by the above-mentioned types of alliances involving the nuclear weapon powers. Since Pakistan has a long experience of aligning itself with the United States, the Chagai nuclear explosion and its new nuclear status would subsequently allow itself to claim greater relevance as an alliance partner of the US than ever before. It is worth remembering how the United States changed its Asian strategy after the People's Republic of China emerged as a nuclear weapon power in 1964. In a span of mere seven years, the PRC was allowed by the US and others to enter the United Nations as a permanent member of the Security Council. The US also sought to co-opt China as a strategic partner against the former Soviet Union, particularly in the Asian region.

Bailing out a Failing State

Sooner or later, the US policy towards Pakistan would change. The Pressler Amendment, the sanctions, the call for ending that country's nuclear weapons programme all would become a thing of the past. Pakistan would begin to benefit from massive American military and economic assistance, possibly greater in volume than one saw during the Afghanistan crisis. The direction towards this kind of relationship is already visible. One day before Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was to meet US President Clinton in Washington, the American sanctions against India and Pakistan, imposed in the wake of the series of nuclear tests in the subcontinent, were relaxed. Such relaxation was made to look like a reward to both India and Pakistan for their declared intentions to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) before 1999. However, unlike India, Pakistan got an additional reward – the US support for International Monetary Fund's \$5.5 billion worth of bail-out plan for the Pakistani economy. Moreover, Clinton and Sharif have also agreed upon a plan to resolve the dispute over the payment for the F-16 aircraft. Once resolved, Pakistan would get back about \$501 million. Return of this money would very much help Pakistan at a time when the country's foreign exchange reserve is abysmally low.

Why is the United States so keen to bail out the Pakistani economy? It was not considered that important by Washington only a few months earlier when Pakistan had not demonstrated its nuclear capability, although Pakistani economy was already in a precarious condition. What is the urgency now? The Clinton Administrations' argument is that it is dangerous to allow the economy of a nuclear Pakistan slide down beyond the critical point. But the fact remains that the Pakistani economic vulnerabilities offer the US a greater opportunity to establish strategic ties with Islamabad on American terms. The United States could now turn Pakistan once again into a valuable Asian ally and would seek its assistance in addressing the questions of peace and stability in an area much larger than the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan may join the ranks of Japan, South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines as closest American post-Cold War strategic partners in Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.

Are there indications of such an alliance-in-the-making? Of course, there are several indications. Last month, Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Shamshad Ahmad told reporters at a news briefing: “We seek revival of our strategic partnership on the basis of new realities...We wish to renew our relations with the US on the basis of shared values and goals.”

Soon Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif was ready to make a trip to Washington. On the eve of his departure, he made it clear at Islamabad: “It will be my endeavour to restore the close and cooperative relations that have existed between the countries in economic and defense field.” Pakistan hardly says, “No” to the United States, if it is a matter of forging closer security ties with that country. For decades, it was Pakistan, which was practically begging to establish such ties with Washington. It was Washington’s turn to do so during the days of Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan. Now both Washington and Islamabad seem to be interested in forging closer strategic partnership.

A Vulnerable Deterrence!

Pakistan has several compulsions to do so. A country goes nuclear to develop deterrence or almost a full-proof capability against aggression. But Pakistan has become more vulnerable to external pressure after it went nuclear. It developed deterrent capability against India—a country, which has never attacked Pakistan. But Pakistan has opened several windows of vulnerability to other external powers in an advertent manner. It has no choice but to offer its partnership to the United States. Pakistan’s vulnerability would enable Washington to forge closer strategic partnership with that country on American terms. Such vulnerabilities, more over, would make Pakistan dependent on the US for decades. In order to take advantage of the situation, the Clinton Administration is playing a very sophisticated game.

Clinton’s White House is carefully making use of its new authority to flexibly apply sanctions to bolster Pakistan’s economy. The goal is not to bring about an economic miracle in Pakistan but to play Santa Claus to convince the Pakistanis that only America is their friend in need. Although the US Administration officials have been taking pains to explain that Washington is not discriminating against India, there is a long history of the US policies, which are quite discriminating in nature. The US policy towards the Kashmir issue, the US approach towards proliferation issue and the US position during India-Pakistan wars make it abundantly clear how Washington discriminates in favour of Pakistan.

This time, the US policy of discrimination on behalf of Pakistan has a larger goal. It is aimed at forging a bilateral strategic partnership that would serve American interest not just in South Asia but in a larger area of Asia, beyond the Islamic neighbourhood. India would gain little by criticising the US policy. For long New Delhi has been petitioning to Washington to refrain from arming Pakistan to a degree that would encourage an arms race in South Asia, to put pressure on Pakistan and discourage it from interfering in internal affairs of India, especially in the Indian state of Kashmir. The Indian appeals have almost always fallen on deaf ears. The time has come when India should recognise the reality and learn to deal with it by itself.

