

Opinion – Pakistan’s Perilous Status

Written by Shaarif Sameer

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/16/opinion-pakistans-perilous-status/>

SHAARIF SAMEER, MAY 16 2023

Since its inception, Pakistan has bought its way through crises from great power patronage by US or a clientage relationship with China. It is losing both of them. For the first time, the country doesn’t seem to have its traditional base of international support to squeak its way through a troika of economic, political, and security crises that it currently faces. Owing to its fortunate geography and historical alignments with great powers, the political elite in Pakistan had mastered the art of managing domestic crises by capitalizing on international crises; however, both the US and China seem to have lost interest in the country.

Just a decade ago, the country was strategically important to both US and China. Despite Pakistan’s erratic policy on Afghanistan and a flirtatious relationship with the Taliban, the US needed the country for the continuity of its military operations in Afghanistan and a possible withdrawal at later stages. So, it tolerated these indiscretions with a pinch of salt. On the other hand, China kept nurturing Pakistan as a dependable balancer against India and a future bridge with West Asia, both economically and diplomatically. Therefore, China sponsored the country as a possible regional power that could match up with India and provide China with a dependable ally on the international stage. However, contrary to both great powers’ expectations, Pakistan proved to be a difficult and intransigent protégé resulting in both powers distancing themselves from a capricious ally.

Pakistan, on the other hand, needs its international patrons now more than ever. The country is grappling with a debilitating economic crisis, a stalemated political crisis, and an ever-growing security crisis. The country is facing an unprecedented political crisis with widespread discontent against a puppet political leadership and the military leadership due to bad governance and soaring inflation. The former prime minister, whose government was overthrown after a no-confidence motion in parliament, has challenged the powerful military like no one has ever done before. The whole fabric of the political system hangs on a thread where the discontent has reached the point of seditious extent.

In addition, the country is facing the worst economic crisis of its history and is on the verge of bankruptcy. The Depleting foreign exchange reserves, a freefalling currency leading to onerous inflation, and burgeoning external debt obligations harbinger a gloomy outlook of the country’s financial prospects. Along with that, the country is also facing a security crisis driven mainly by internal political dissension and exacerbated by non-state terrorist groups operating within the country. An ever-growing insurgency threat sponsored by Afghan Taliban in the country’s North West poses a serious threat to the country’s security.

Historically, Pakistan has cleverly used its partnership with the US to extract economic, military, and diplomatic benefits in the times of crises. But, after its hasty and precarious withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shifting focus from the convoluted politics of West Asia, US has lost interest in an untrustworthy ally. Pakistan and the US share a history of complicated partnerships where the former willingly offered its services in exchange for quantifiable monetary benefits from the latter. Right after its independence, Pakistan inherited an incessant enmity with India, a much bigger and stronger adversary, that it managed by joining the Capitalist bloc and presenting itself as a dependable anti-Soviet regional partner. Later, the country served as a diplomatic bridge between US and Communist China, leading to the establishment of formal relations between the two and giving US access to the biggest market in the world. In the American self-proclaimed sanctimonious fight against Communism, Pakistan’s support was crucial first in providing US an active base for operations and later nurturing and training Taliban against

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Soviets in Afghanistan.

All of this had a price tag for US. Never an altruist partner, the Pakistani leadership, especially the military brass, was quite crafty in extracting material benefits for itself in exchange for these services. Whether it was the security crises on the Eastern side against India, economic crisis after the country’s tryst with socialism, or the political crisis after the country’s dismemberment, US supported and aided Pakistan in one way or another. The help was also not unconditional, but it always gave the country much-needed breathing space to get out of the crunch. Apparently, US has had enough this time as it seems unwilling to bail its former ally out of troika these of self-inflicted crises.

China, the so-called all-weather friend of Pakistan, also seems to be losing interest in its, one of the oldest and perhaps the only strategic ally in the region. Historically, China has played the role of sole protector of the country on the international stage by acting as the lender of first resort in economic crises and the security provider in case of military crises. However, Pakistan has proven to be an extremely mercurial ally and an unruly friend for a bureaucratic and rules-driven China. Moreover, it seems that China has found other alternatives, like Iran, that are politically more mature and provide the same geographical advantages that Pakistan provided.

The Pakistani leadership sounded the trumpets of celebration when China announced its Belt and Road (BRI) Initiative with China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as its flagship project. Yet, the political instability in the country has precluded China from reaping the benefits that it intended to achieve at the onset of the project. Therefore, China is also pivoting towards more predictable and stable regional partners that not only assent to China’s political ideology but wouldn’t shy away from espousing China’s bureaucratic-economic model.

The domestic political apparatus of Pakistan is not robust enough to deal with the myriad of current crises on its own. The international patronage model was never sustainable; therefore, a joint framework on governance, democracy, and economics based on indigenous capabilities and capacities is need of the hour.

About the author:

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