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Pakistan, India and the Security Council: Thinking the Unthinkables

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Abstract

Pakistan has just been elected to the Security Council with India's support. This may have been in the face of wariness on the part of some of Pakistan's traditional Western allies. This is at a time when Pakistan's relationship with the United States (US) and the West are deteriorating rapidly. India has displayed maturity by not seeking to exploit it. Indeed this falling out with the West may be inversely aiding Indo-Pak relations. But this also creates challenges for New Delhi that will call for considerable diplomatic artfulness and finesse.

Introduction

Most observers of United Nations (UN) politics will agree that we are in for an interesting year ahead. In 2012, both India and Pakistan, known to be sworn rivals in the international scene, will be sitting in the Security Council. India was elected for a two-year term last year. Pakistan secured its own election on 21 October for the same length of time and will be taking its seat starting January 2012. So, for a period of one year, their membership to the UN's most powerful body will coincide. A normal expectation would be that we are in the cusp of great fireworks in that body in the months ahead. This essay will argue that contrary to those expectations, it is not likely to be so.

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A Prognosis with a Difference

The reasons are as follows:

First, India was early in its expression of support to Pakistan. This was owed to the sagacity of its Permanent Representative in New York Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri. He was able to successfully persuade his capital, New Delhi, that Pakistan's victory was inevitable - Kyrgyzstan was the other contender and was obviously no great threat – and therefore, a show of early endorsement would be taking advantage of a rare opportunity to generate a fund of goodwill.

Second, Puri and his Pakistani counterpart, Ambassador Abdullah Hussain Haroon, enjoy excellent personal rapport. Haroon, a non-career public figure of patrician bearings with close links with the Pakistani ruling elite, does not appear to be constrained by the usual 'doubting Thomas' syndrome that has always tended to dog South Asian professional diplomats in intra-regional relations. Puri has shared these positive sentiments in public and private.

Third, while the two countries diverge on issues in the region, on many global subjects, they still see eye to eye. Both have a penchant to be seen as supportive of 'righteous causes'. On thematic issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, both have a common interest in tweaking the norms to accommodate their own nuclear weapon status.

Finally, India will be extremely cautious not to risk in any way its claim to a permanent seat in the Council by clashing with a regional power on any topic of national interest.

This is not to say this cosy state of affairs between the two will not be without pressures and strains. First, the mindset of the two envoys may not be entirely shared by the back-stopping bureaucrats of their respective foreign offices and their political masters. In the Indian system, unorthodox behaviour pattern of an individual diplomatic agent, however positive the results, is frowned upon by the peers, whose patience for out-of-line thinking is limited. In Pakistan, the General Head Quarters of the Armed Forces have a major say on critical foreign policy issues. The UN is not a priority except for its interest in sending peacekeepers, but it is unlikely to allow their Mission in New York free play on 'core interests'.

Second, in the Council, both countries have their respective patrons among the big powers, China in the case of Pakistan, and some say, now the US in the case of India. But as yet China has been playing a very responsible role in the Council, in total consonance with (former Chinese leader) Deng Xiao Ping's dictum 'hide your capabilities and bide your time', and is not unlikely to drag Pakistan into any unsavoury situation.

As for pandering to the US, India has most certainly been taking an independent line, often to the former's, though unstated, chagrin, such as during the vote on Libya. Still, it is very

possible that from time to time, the enthusiastic amity in New York framed by their diplomats may be reined in by the policy makers at home.

Politics of Flux in the Region

Yet, what is happening in New York, between India and Pakistan, is not entirely delinked from developments in the region itself at this time. The series of events including the US-led Osama bin Laden raid and the subsequent pressures on Pakistan, unheeded to date, to tighten the noose around the Haqqani network insurgents, and the numerous attacks in Pakistan on NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) supplies for Afghanistan, have severely strained the relations between Pakistan and the West. This is also said to be reflected in the 55 votes that Kyrgystan secured against Pakistan; where, for instance, did these come from? India, as we have seen, was not among them.

Most Pakistanis now see the West, rather than India, as the principal adversary. Even if the all-powerful Pakistani Armed forces should need an enemy as its 'raison d'être', the West may fill in for India, and indeed might be a better substitute, with even wider public support against it, if polls are to be believed (not counting chronic Indophiles such as some religious extremists). A recent important confidence building measure was the Pakistani cabinet's decision to accord India Most Favoured Nation treatment in trade. India has provided the same to Pakistan in 1996, but Pakistan has been dragging its feet because of Kashmir and other issues. So this is now seen as a big step.

In fact, recently, the Pakistani Army Chief Pervez Kayani has said he could not rule out a US attack on Pakistan, just as Bruce Riedel, an adviser to the US President Barack Obama, talked of 'containment' of Pakistan (which Pakistanis interpret as seizure through some means of its rapidly growing nuclear stock-pile).

Pakistan has just test-fired a Hatf V11 stealth cruise missile, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, which is a low-flying and terrain hugging, with high manoeuvrability, pinpoint accuracy and radar avoidance features, with a range of 700 km. The timing of the test coincided with Kayani's assertions that the US would have to think 'ten times' before making any further incursions into Pakistan, because the latter was not a weak country like Iraq or Afghanistan, but a strong one with nuclear power.

Pakistan and the US have been allies for so long, dating back to the days of Baghdad Pact, CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), and SEATO (South-East Asian Treaty Organization) in the 1950s that such scenarios appear unthinkable thoughts, but the twists and turns of history are such that they are no longer improbable.

Conclusion

Ironical as it may seem, there is a likelihood of Pakistan's relations with India developing in an inverse ratio, vis-à-vis, its relations with the West and the US. This is not lost on the leadership of both countries and they are playing their cards extremely cautiously.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, who, despite her youth and inexperience has been taking the world unexpectedly by surprise with her diplomatic prowess, has been holding out the olive branch to India. India is by no means gloating over Pakistan's falling out with the West, and its Foreign Minister S M Krishna has already spoken of the 'devastating consequences' such a situation may have for the region. India obviously is not looking to exploiting it to its advantage.

For one thing, it would drive Pakistan further into China's arms. For another, conflict with the West will turn Pakistan horrifically chaotic, which could destabilise India as well. India's interest would lie in a stable Pakistan, not inimical towards it, but it seems only way this would come about is if Pakistan's relationship with the West is adversarial.

But it would be in India's interest that this adversarial relationship does not spill into a war-like situation of actual conflict. All this would call for substantial diplomatic finesse and sophistication on the part of New Delhi. There could be glimmerings of this in the support to Pakistan for the Security Council seat, perhaps in the face of Western opposition. Demands of diplomacy can often make strange bedfellows!

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