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SADF COMMENT

Will Pakistan Ever Change its Foreign Policy?

Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan is confronted with a lot of domestic threats and international challenges. Starting with the state-building process with much limited institutional capacities and financial resources, the leadership of the newly founded Muslim nation developed an extraordinary - occasionally described as paranoid- security dominated mind-set resulting in quite peculiar policies to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as to ensure its foreign policy interests. Some of the key features are: the continuation of colonial policies (like the Political Agent System/PAS and Frontier Crime Regulations/FCR in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas/FATA), extraordinary repressive policies in areas perceived as restive like Balochistan or former East Pakistan (today Bangladesh), or a remarkable aggressive foreign policy which finds its expression not only in persistently recurring border skirmishes with its Afghan neighbor but also in three wars with India (1947, 1965, 1971) and a perfidiously assault at the Indian administered Kargil in 1999, just a couple of months after New Delhi started a peace process with Islamabad. Subsequently it is not surprises that the country's security analysts and officials are not talking about Afghan or Indian border instead they use terms like "Western" or "Eastern front".

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Reg. Num. BE 833606320

Keywords: Pakistan, Terrorism, China, Afghanistan, CPEC, India, US

The latter one can be described as symptomatic for how Pakistani establishment is thinking about its neighbours, which of course is further entrenching threat perceptions and security paranoia as crucial determinants in the country's decision-making process.

Despite numerous critical junctures, like the fact that Pakistan lost all the war it fought; it experienced the separation and independence of its Eastern wing (Bangladesh); it turned into the epicentre of international terrorism; and it got more or less totally isolated in the extended South Asian region, it does not seem that Pakistan's leadership is willing to carry out any substantial assessment of its interests, goals, and respective policies so far. But since 2013, severe, new occurrences emerged: the first transfer of power between two elected (civilian) governments after decades of military rule and civilian autocracy; the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, heralded as a booster for the country's flagging economy and relations between Beijing and Islamabad; a significant worsening of the internal security situation by anti-Pakistan terror groups (for example the Peshawar school massacre); a cooling down of US-Pakistan relations, and the subsequent launch of major counter-terrorism campaigns.

By observing these trajectories, several domestic and international analysts were wondering if these happenings could initiate a change in the mind-set and policy approaches of Pakistan's elite. But the recently expressed hopes that Pakistan will break with the unfortunate patterns of the past and work towards an improvement of the relations with its neighbours and betterment of the social, economic and political conditions within its disadvantaged provinces of Balochistan, KPK (and FATA) and other areas under its enforced administration like Gilgit-Baltistan got quickly disappointed. The resilience of Pakistan's conservative security orientated mind-set continues to block any substantially changes in the country politics which can be identified especially in following contexts:

Firstly, terrorism and Pakistan's threat perception of Afghanistan and India

Pakistan enhanced tremendously its efforts in fighting terrorism and militancy on its own soil, especially after the Peshawar school massacre in 2014. The formulation of the National Action

Plan (NAP), the establishment of military courts and the launch of the large-scale military operation Zarb-e-Azb are some consequences of the growing public pressure and international criticism on the national government and security agents blamed for not tackling adequately the challenge of Jihadist militancy. However, it is crucial to recognize that all the military actions against the terrorists were mainly directed against terror group fighting Pakistani state and society. Militant groups using Pakistan's territory as base for recruitment and training but operating abroad got largely spared. Subsequently one must state, that Pakistan's conservative security circles are continuing the traditional policy of using militant groups carrying out cross-border terrorist activities to achieve foreign and security policy goals. By having said this, worrying aspects are the worsening security situation in Afghanistan created by pro-Pakistani terror groups in order to undermine Indian influence and defense cooperation between Kabul and New Delhi. The latest major terror attack in Kabul by Taliban as a clear response to India's pledge of increasing support for Afghan army is confirming the current high threat perception and volatility in Afghanistan's internal security scenario. In sum, there is a clear contradiction between Pakistan's official rhetoric in joining the "global war on terror" and its ongoing sponsorship of terror groups operating in Afghanistan and India. As such, there was never a new strategy or intension by Pakistan in fighting international terrorism outside its own borders.

Secondly, the latest deterioration of US-Pakistan ties

Up and downs are nothing new in the US-Pakistan relations. However, this time the cooling down is accompanied with a tremendous intensification of Pakistan-China ties. These were always on a relatively good track but since 2014 with the start of the establishment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the bilateral relations were not only broadening but much deepening too. Ranging from massive CPEC related investments, including more than \$ 50 billion, to an enhanced security & defence cooperation, there are increasing domestic and international voices warning that Pakistan might transform into a 'Chinese satellite' state. In this context, one should be also aware that there is a remarkable asymmetry in the perception of each other: The majority of Pakistan's people see China in an

extraordinary positive light. However, the common Chinese people who identify Pakistan as the epicentre of terrorism, militancy, regional insurgencies, religious radicalisation and political violence do not reflect such high esteem. In other words, Pakistan is hosting all unfortunate phenomena, which the central government in Beijing describes as the three major evils: "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". Nevertheless, the numerous large common interests will without doubt bridge the imbalance in sympathies and function as a common bond in Sino-Pak relations. Against this backdrop one can state that due to the massive Chinese investments, Pakistan is not only able to diversify its foreign aid but also to gain more independence from US financial support. This is gaining significance in case of an increase of China-US tensions in the South China Sea as well as India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean. The fact that there is a new rapprochement between Washington and New Delhi, will not only create more suspicion and hostilities in Pakistan-India relations but will also lead to a further alienation in military-to-military ties which was until now the guarantor of basic stability in US-Pakistan relations. In consequence, one should expect a further deepening of the relations between Pakistan and China, moving the South Asian country even more out of the orbit of US influence. Against this backdrop, the cooling of US-Pakistan relations might encourage Pakistan to continue using not only proxy forces in Afghanistan but also in Indian administered Kashmir as well as in the Indian Punjab. The terror attacks in Pathankot and in Gurdaspur (both in Punjab) by Pakistani based terror groups' emphasises the willingness of Pakistan to destabilise its neighbours - perceived as hostile - and increase their costs for maintaining security and law and order. Until recently Washington was able to function as a 'guardian' over Pakistan's support for cross-border activities and on numerous occasions the US successfully convinced the country's powerful military and intelligence service ISI to contain -at least temporarily- its cooperation with terror groups. However, the fact that two of the most wanted terrorists world-wide, Osama-bin Laden (Al Qaeda) and Mullah Omar (Taliban) were living quite comfortably under the eyes of Pakistan's security agents amplifies Pakistan's 'double game' and ambiguity in fighting against terrorism. In this context, one should mention that China remains relatively silent as long as neither Chinese interests, nor a Chinese citizen are endangered. Furthermore, Beijing offered on numerous

occasions diplomatic support by blocking international, UN sanctions against Pakistan based terrorists.

In sum, taking above mentioned developments into account, one must state that despite the tremendous international developments and the increasing challenges, Pakistan's elite is not willing to carry out any fundamental change, neither in its domestic, nor in its foreign policy parameters.