Pakistan and Central Asia: New Phase, Same Goals

In May and June, 2015, Islamabad made another breakthrough with the governments of Central Asia. Prime Minister MianMuhammad Nawaz Sharif made official state visits to Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to discuss long-standing, traditional joint investment, trade, and energy projects. Then the Islamabad delegation went to Russia. Pakistan is “gasping for breath” from shortages of energy and fresh water and the lack of high-capacity external markets, etc. But the country is able to meet all of its needs with the help of its immediate western neighbors.

What causes this enhanced focus on Central Asia in the foreign policy of Nawaz Sharif’s government in his third year in power? We believe there are several reasons, politically and chronologically linked with each other.

The withdrawal of US and NATO coalition forces in December 2014 from Afghanistan due to the completion of the military mission in the country led to a decline in Washington’s interest in the entire Af-Pak region and in its strategic partner in the struggle against international terrorism, Pakistan. Once again, as in the 1980s, Islamabad was left without financial and infrastructure support from overseas. Washington declared that Islamabad had the right and capacity to fight terrorism on its own, and simultaneously deal with its socioeconomic problems.

European Union’s relations with Pakistan have also cooled; one of the reasons for this being Islamabad’s repeal of the death penalty moratorium in December 2014. Since January 2014, the G+ regime has been in place in Pakistan: the preferential tax treatment for the imports of Pakistani goods to the European market in exchange for Pakistan’s observance of civil rights and civic freedoms.

Saudi Arabia drastically curtailed investment and other aid after the decision by the National Assembly (the lower house of parliament) of Pakistan on April 10, 2015, to refuse to send federal army troops to fight for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against Houthi insurgents in neighboring Yemen.

The implementation of several Turkish projects has slowed recently. The number of Islamabad’s rich friends (from overseas) has thus been tapering off.

In contrast to the situation in the 1980s, when the countries of Western Asia were just beginning to raise the issue of regional integration, in 2015 centripetal forces have prevailed. Islamabad is again turning to its neighbors, but from a different position this time.

In recent years, there has clearly been a consistently expanding solidification of political ties between Pakistan and China, as well as military and technical cooperation and trade and economic relations. Monthly magazine Hilal published by the military authorities claimed in its June 2015 issue that “economic modernization, thanks to Chinese investment, and the successful battle against terrorism and ethnic warfare are creating favorable conditions for a firm foundation of national security.” In other words, financial aid from Beijing, together with national integration, political stability, responsible relations between military and civilian authorities, and the government’s economic growth program, constitutes one of components of state security.

In its “Islamabad Project,” Beijing is pursuing the goal of multi-vector geographic involvement, in the Central Asian (bordering Russia) and Middle Eastern (bordering Africa) economic zones. This aggregate of various projects is
called the “Silk Road.” It involves a revival of historical trade routes with regard to political viability, security needs, economic stability and the demand pattern among member states. In other words, changing geopolitical realities and economic priorities have pushed forward its revitalization. That suits China’s strategy directed toward activating its inner, less developed North-Western regions such as Xinjiang.

For its part Pakistan, a country with a deficit of resources (particularly in terms of power supply, fresh water, limited availability of raw materials, and finances), provides its territory, and acts in this project as a transit country; it advances its own economic aims and simultaneously serves the interests of its main client.

In March of 2015, Islamabad and Beijing signed dozens of infrastructure and other agreements amounting to a total of 46 billion dollars. Some of the projects are related to Central Asian regional economic cooperation. For example, thanks to transport corridors 5 and 6 of CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation) Pakistan will be joined to Central Asia, connecting Chinese Kashgar with the cities of Osh and Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and Murgab in Tajikistan with the Karasu River.

Road communications between Chitral and Ishkashim will connect Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan via the Wakhan Corridor (located in the direct proximity to the Chinese border).

The four-party agreement on transit traffic by Pakistan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan is another important means of advancing economic relations among these countries.

In Turkmenistan, the parties once again discussed the need to move forward with trans-regional energy projects, including TAPI, to further develop regional integration. Pakistan values its relationship with Turkmenistan, not only in view of its potential as a source of raw hydrocarbons, but also as a country with access to the Caspian Sea, and further – a quick route into Western markets.

The CASA-1000 project, the development of Pakistan’s port of Gwadar, and the pipeline installation between Gwadar and Nawabshah are also parts of these considerations. Other important projects include the North-South gas pipeline and the modernization of two thermal power stations in Pakistan according to plans laid by the Russian company Technopromexport.

The planned infrastructure projects spread over the territory of Pakistan have given an additional impetus to “working” projects in Western Asia. Both China and Iran have confirmed their intention to build a railway. The line begins in Chinese Kashgar, proceeding through the territory of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and only then will connect with Iran’s railway network.

Islamabad is looking at expanding its ties with Central Asian states not only in order to strengthen its economic potential, but also to advance its political aims. Pakistan is grateful to Central Asian republics for their support of its request for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the permanent basis.

An equally important consideration from Islamabad’s perspective is reforms of the UN Security Council. Its position against expansion of the Security Council is known. Pakistan has consistently, for many years, come out against increasing the number of permanent members, taking into account India’s application; and the country is thankful to Central Asian states, when they put forward demands for “taking into account the interests of small states in the Security Council reform.”

Simultaneously with trade and economic projects countries are taking joint measures in the fight against terrorism and illegal drug trafficking.

It is too soon to talk about any conclusions or outcomes of the “Great Silk Road,” but there are increasingly glimpses of information in the world media hinting that its renascence carries the potential for a transformation of regional politics that can offer a response to collective actions of the EU and the US.

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