

New dynamic in the north west

Two developments last week pointed to the new directions in which the north-western Subcontinent could evolve. One is the fresh international agreement to put Pakistan on notice with regard to financing terror groups. The other is the ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of the trans-border natural gas pipeline in Afghanistan. The decisions of the United Nations Financial Action Task Force (FATF) are about using the threat of economic punishment to move Pakistan away from funding terrorists operating against Afghanistan and India. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is premised on the hope that economic self interest could eventually bring the region together. Success is certainly not assured on either front.

But they are significant for one simple reason — defying the conventional wisdom. Consider, for example, the range of traditional assumptions on the international community's will and capability to coerce Pakistan. For one, it has been widely held that the US can never really nudge Pakistan away from using terror to dominate Afghanistan and destabilise India. When US President Donald Trump announced his intention to do exactly that last summer, it was greeted with scepticism in Delhi, disbelief in Washington and disdain in Rawalpindi. In Delhi, the expert community insisted that America does not have the stamina to stay the course on compelling Pakistan.

In Washington, the foreign policy establishment saw this as one more silly idea from the White House. For the traditionalists in the beltway, the Pakistan army was too nuclear to displease and too important a regional partner for America to alienate. That none of Trump's recent predecessors were willing or able to push Rawalpindi beyond a point on terror was incontrovertible proof that Trump was being utterly unrealistic.

That nothing will change in the US-Pak equation was also the conviction in Rawalpindi, where the Pakistan army is headquartered. Rawalpindi judged that the new lot in the White House would figure out that the game in Afghanistan is already lost for the US and that Trump, like Obama, will have to head for the exits in Afghanistan.

If Trump surprised the world by announcing a major cut in military assistance to Pakistan in January this year, Pakistan seemed to brush off the threat. Rawalpindi's confident response was marked by ramping up terror attacks against the government in Afghanistan.

Instead of backing off, Trump has gone a step further — to mobilise the international community to squeeze Pakistan's terror strategy by choking its finances. Here again, the general consensus was that Pakistan had immunity thanks to its all-weather partnership with China. If Pakistan was confident that China will not let India and the West hang it out to dry on the question of terror finance, it was surprised by the FATF decisions in Paris last week. To be sure, it is entirely possible that China's support for the decision to put Pakistan on a grey list is only an exception rather than a basic change in Beijing's policy. But reports that China's move followed a deal with India and the US that would let Beijing gain a larger role at the FATF in the future are interesting. Delhi has every reason to cheer any prospect of change in Beijing's position and continue to press for China's cooperation in countering the sources of terror in the region.

China's support is not only critical for weaning Pakistan away from its addiction to terror, but also in putting together the right incentives for Rawalpindi to accept its responsibility to facilitate regional economic cooperation. That is where the TAPI pipeline comes in. It is also a project that has gone against the grain of regional politics.

On its part, Pakistan had generally resisted all economic cooperation with India, either bilaterally or regionally, and held it hostage to the resolution of the Kashmir question. It has been even more

neuralgic about engaging India on anything to do with Afghanistan. But through the last decade and more, Pakistan has sat down with its two neighbours and Turkmenistan to advance the project. To see the Indian minister of state for external affairs, M J Akbar, share the podium with the presidents of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and the prime minister of Pakistan in Herat last week is interesting but not entirely surprising.

It is not just Pakistan. Even the Taliban has apparently promised not to attack the TAPI pipeline that it described as a “national project”. Ironically, the idea of building the TAPI at a cost of nearly \$10 billion has received little international support. No banker appears willing to risk large amounts of capital in a sub-region marked unending terror and its negative impact on the political relations involving Kabul, Rawalpindi and Delhi.

This is where Beijing could chip in. Could it take the TAPI pipeline under the wings of China’s massive Belt and Road Initiative? Might India, which objected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor running through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir citing sovereignty concerns, be less hostile to Beijing’s support for the TAPI? After all, the TAPI does not go through Kashmir.

The new dynamic in the region offers two important guidelines for Indian policy. First, the past is not necessarily a guide to the future. After all structural changes over time are inevitable. Second, India has the resources and agency to alter the strategic condition of its north west. Delhi must continue to bet on them.

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