

Pakistan's Geo-economics Is Working Well

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When the whole world is lamenting that the US is quitting Afghanistan in ignominy, the Biden Administration is snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. What an audacity of hope!

The agreement reached in principle in Tashkent on Friday between the representatives of the United States, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan “to establish a new quadrilateral diplomatic platform focused on enhancing regional connectivity” is a watershed event in regional politics marking the overnight transition in the US regional strategy from the hurly-burly of battles to geo-economics. It is breath-taking.

This QUAD idea stems from the Biden administration’s realisation that “peace and regional connectivity are mutually reinforcing” — something that China had discovered almost a decade ago.

The [joint statement](#) issued at Tashkent says that the four countries recognise a “historic opportunity to open flourishing international trade routes, [and] the parties intend to cooperate to expand trade, build transit links and strengthen business-to-business ties.”

The parties agreed to meet in the coming months to determine the modalities of this cooperation with mutual consensus.

This major development underscores that Washington intends to remain involved in Afghanistan’s stability. That augurs well for the intra-Afghan dialogue.

The US is intensely conscious that its prestige in the region is at its nadir today and it stands isolated, as the [reported cheeky Russian offer](#) volunteering to be America’s gatekeeper shows.

Evidently, Washington is reluctant to accept the Russian offer, which can turn out to be an Albatross. That explains to an extent its thoughtful move to create a regional axis of friendly states who are manifestly keen to foster ties and willing to work with the US in the region. Potentially, Washington may have use for the US-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan as a “counterweight” to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which is dominated by China

and Russia.

Despite their friendly relations with China (and Russia), both Uzbekistan and Pakistan are eager to deepen relations with the US. And they are the two biggest countries in the Greater Middle Eastern arc stretching from Persian Gulf to Central Asia's border with China.

Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan are also Muslim countries and they provide a market of around 300 million people. No doubt, the US did its homework. This QUAD has viability unlike its insipid namesake in the "Indo-Pacific."

In the recent years, the US has been paying extra attention to cultivate friendly ties with Uzbekistan, which is not only the biggest country in Central Asia but a relative success story regionally in political stability and overall developmental trajectory.

Tashkent has been receptive to Washington's overtures, as strong ties with America help it to balance Russia and will strengthen its strategic autonomy.

The new Quad signals the US' receptiveness to Pakistan's persisting demand for a bilateral relationship that goes beyond Afghan issues. There are [fault lines in the China-Pakistan relationship](#), which are no more possible to conceal, and in Washington's judgment, Pakistani elites, civilian and military, have remained as western-oriented as ever despite their alienation in the recent decade.

To be sure, with the curtain coming down on the Afghan war, the time has come for establishing rail/road links connecting Central Asia with Karachi/Gwadar ports. The expected improvement in the security situation allows mega projects to be implemented. Conceivably, the Taliban would have no reservations over the QUAD. The Pakistani ports are ideally placed to connect the resource-rich Central Asian region and Afghanistan with the world market.

There are seamless possibilities ahead. The recent G7 summit in Cornwall had agreed on a new initiative to support global infrastructure investment. A recent paper by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC saw this new global infrastructure initiative as a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] with emphasis on catalysing private capital to invest in global infrastructure. [read more](#)

The German **Chancellor Angela Merkel** said on Thursday after talks with President Biden at the White House that when Germany's turn comes next year to chair the G7, Berlin intends to implement the Cornwall Summit's decision. Will G7 join the US' QUAD initiative in Central Asia?

Clearly, by having both the CPEC and the QUAD on its platter, Pakistan is tasing success in its foreign-policy shift toward geoeconomics. Pakistan's geography makes it a turf for competition between China and the West in infrastructure development. Simply put, the new QUAD will impact regional politics.

Indeed, the US hopes to wean Pakistan away from its heavy dependence on China. The new QUAD will make India look an outlier drifting aimlessly without a sense of direction. India turned its back on China's BRI but Pakistan secured the \$60 billion CPEC and is now looking forward to the US-led QUAD.

India's relations with China are in deep chill and its traditional friendly ties with Russia have

become listless, whereas, Pakistan not only enriched its ties with China but is successfully exploring the multipolarity in the world order.

On July 16, Pakistan and Russia signed a mega deal for a 1100 km gas pipeline project costing between \$2.5 - \$3 billion connecting Karachi and Lahore which will transport imported LNG (for which it has separately signed a deal with Qatar whereby 200 mmcf of gas will initially reach Karachi's LNG terminal in the beginning of next year that would be enhanced to 400 mmcf in the coming years.) Whereas, India's gas pipeline project with Iran has been languishing as pipe dream. [read more](#)

Pakistan is anxious to have President Putin inaugurate the groundbreaking of the gas pipeline project, which is expected to be held later this year or in early 2022. Delhi should seriously introspect whether its passionate embrace of the US bandwagon through the past decade under successive governments, brought any significant dividends.

Pakistan is once again becoming a frontline state in big-power rivalry. But this time around, Pakistan stands to gain out of its geography and hopes to create equity for its development.

Conceivably, the new Quad is the brainchild of **Zalmay Khalilzad**, US special representative on Afghanistan, who has for long advocated that the best way of stabilising Afghanistan is by encouraging the reset in the Pakistani calculus away from militancy and extremism to peace and development.

Pakistan's epochal journey is bound to be painful and will face uncertainties, as the past week's [events in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#) province and Islamabad remind us. The US can help cement it as an irreversible shift by offering a meaningful partnership to Pakistan.

In all likelihood, China will only welcome the US initiative as it is in the overall interests of regional security and stability from which Beijing also stands to gain. China has huge stakes in Pakistan's and Afghanistan's security and development, and in this respect, a congruence of interests between Beijing and Washington is entirely conceivable.

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Featured image: Nine Chinese citizens were killed after a bus carrying them plunged into a ravine following an explosion in Pakistan's far north Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, July 14, 2021. (Source: Indian Punchline)

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