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Indo-Pak Ties between Ministerial Visits and the China Factor

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The India-Pakistan-China triangle with its complex bi-lateral linkages among the three interlocutors has become very active in recent weeks – and the speculation about the Chinese supply of additional nuclear reactors to Pakistan without NSG concurrence had also heightened the interest index many global capitals.

Rarely has the complex and bitterly contested Indo-Pak relationship which was further vitiated by the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai been punctuated by such high level political contact as we are now witnessing. On June 25-26, Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram met with his Pakistani counterpart Rehman Malik on the sidelines of the SAARC Home and interior ministers meeting in Islamabad. Predictably the focus of the deliberations was on the T word – terrorism. And on July 15 Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna will begin his maiden visit to Islamabad for bi-lateral talks with his counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

Concurrently the Indian National Security Adviser Shiv Shankar Menon visited Beijing from July 3-6 and his visit overlapped with that of Pakistani President Asif Zardari who began his four day visit to China on July 6. Regular meetings among Southern Asia's major states is a desirable pattern and this time, the outcome of the NSA's China visit from the Indian perspective – when contrasted with that of the Zardari visit is instructive.

According to reports in the Chinese media, the Menon visit was interpreted in a cautiously positive manner and the July 5 reports dwelt on PM Wen Jiabao referring to the importance of India as a strategic partner of cooperation. Further PM Wen is reported to have said: "We will work with India

to maintain high level visits and take care of each other's core interests and major concerns." Core concerns is a new formulation – and merits attention here in India – especially in relation to Pakistan, whose 'all-weather' status with China was the focus of the Zardari visit. It is also pertinent to note that after the Zardari visit – there was no direct reference to the nuclear reactors in the official release and the Chinese President Hu Jintao was reported to have observed: "China is a friend and a strategic partner, committed to the promotion of stability and economic progress of Pakistan." In his media interaction, President Zardari was more effusive and projected Pakistan as being China's 'force-multiplier'. This phrase has many shades of interpretation as far as Delhi is concerned.

Apropos the troubled Indo-Pak bi-lateral relationship, while the cordiality exuded at the Chidambaram-Malik meeting is noteworthy and augurs well for the Krishna-Qureshi interaction, the structural constraints that afflict both South Asian neighbors in their bi-lateral relationship cannot be ignored – and the Chinese response to this aspect is critical.

India and Pakistan must remain engaged in dialogue at the official level and this is imperative given the post 1998 nuclear status of both nations and the ill-advised Pakistani adventurism of May 1999 in Kargil. However it is unlikely that there will be any break-through on the central issues that animate the polity and the policy-maker on both sides. For India the central issue is the T word - terror and the support that the Pakistani establishment provides to this scourge. This was the focus of the composite dialogue agreement signed between India and Pakistan in January 2004 and General Musharraf at the time had made a solemn commitment that Islamabad would desist from such behavior. And post the November 2008 Mumbai attack, the current government in Delhi is under close scrutiny to remain steadfast in seeking justice for the victims - and the institutional orientation apropos terrorism and religious radicalism it expects from the civilian dispensation in Islamabad. Chidambaram held this line in a firm and polite manner and Krishna can be expected to do the same in mid July.

India has never questioned Pakistan's right to acquire nuclear weapons – clandestinely or otherwise - or the Chinese cooperation in this regard. India's core concern since May 1990 when terrorism and related turbulence with cross-border support (read Pak ISI) flared up in Kashmir has been the manner in which the Pak military has sought to use its nuclear capability to follow what is called as a 'revisionist' agenda against India. This included support to terror and religious radicalism in J&K and the determined attempt to change the border by force – for example the May 1999 Kargil misadventure.

It merits recall at this point that in 1999, at the height of the Kargil war China maintained a studious neutrality and did not overtly apply any military pressure on India even as the USA brokered an uneasy truce between the nuclear armed neighbors.

Thus when India is seeking to resume the official dialogue with Pakistan at the political-Foreign Minister level, the focus or the core concern for Delhi will be about the Pak military's determination to invest in those terror groups – like the LeT – for retaining 'strategic depth' through controlling terror attacks apropos India and Afghanistan in the post July 2011 scenario.

The prevailing turbulence in Afghanistan and the manner in which the USA and the ISAF forces are reviewing their options has much relevance for India, Pakistan and China. Again it is instructive that China also has anxieties about religious radicalism in its Xianjiang province and this was part of the Hu-Zardari dialogue in early July. In short, General Kayani is unlikely to alter the Pak Army GHQ view that India is the greater threat to Pakistan – and crack down on groups like the LeT.

Hence the 'outcome' of redressing the trust-deficit that Chidambaram and now Krishna are seeking from Pakistan is likely to remain elusive, given this civil-military dissonance in Islamabad over terrorism and the deeply ingrained perception about the nature of the threat to Pakistan's core national interest – despite the Lahore Data Darbar mosque attack.

China can persuade Pakistan to change its orientation to religious radicalism and terrorism – but this will benefit both the USA and India – and Beijing does not appear convinced that there is a convergence of 'core concern' yet – on this issue.

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