



## Pakistan and the Fallacy of Geo-Economics The Race for Central Asia

Since its founding, Pakistan has remained a state under threat. The eastern wing of the moth-eaten Pakistan that was compromised upon in 1947, had borders with a hostile neighbor, India, to the east. At the same time, its inception reopened old questions concerning ethnic fault lines in South Asia. Across the border to the east, in the Kingdom of Afghanistan, it faced a Pashtun nationalist government with territorial claims crossing the British-era Durand line and which sought to absorb all territories inhabited by their ethnic kin in Pakistan.

The state of Pakistan was established with the promise that Islam would be its distinguishing feature. However, after its inception, its rulers soon shifted gears and continued to implement the secular Government of India Act 1935, with the Objectives Resolution as lip-service, to give it an Islamic flavor. This reliance on an overtly secular framework didn't appeal to the Islamic masses and ultimately failed to harmonize the society. It left the state weak internally as well as on the external front. This is tragic, as the Islamic ideals, which became a rallying cry for the Islamic-leaning Muslim masses of the Indian Sub-Continent, were able to achieve a homeland for the Muslims. However, when the same ideals were discarded within the state's structure, the state immediately began to lose its coherence. Islam was reduced to a state religion, just as Christianity is seen as in the Western secular states, when it could have been much more as a Caliphate.

In order to overcome this self-inflicted weakness, whilst not relying on the strength of Islam, Pakistan's rulers sought support from foreign powers to sustain the state, both militarily and economically. This is one of the reasons Pakistan acted as a willing and resourceful agent of the US since General Ayub's era. The US in turn bestowed military and economic largesse upon the Pakistani ruling elite, especially within its military, in order to strengthen its stranglehold over its newly won-over client state. Previously in the fifties, Pakistan was offered membership of CENTO, a military alliance grafted over the existing SEATO, in order to link Pakistan, which was the western-most member of SEATO, with Turkey, the eastern-most member of NATO. It was around a decade later, in 1964, with the direction of the US, that the regional members of CENTO, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran, formed a distinct geo-economic organization, the Regional Cooperation for Development. Under the RCD, as it was known, a highway spanning the three countries was developed. Some stamps containing the pictures of deceased and living political personalities were issued, as well as heritage sites formed.

Lacking a single unifying vision, except for obedience of Western colonialists, the three states could not achieve much. After twelve unsatisfactory years, the three regional heads of state held a summit in Izmir, Turkey in April 1976, making amendments to the 1964 declaration. The Treaty of Izmir was signed in 1977 as the legal framework for RCD, yet the RCD still did not take off. In 1979, the RCD was ultimately abolished. What was previously pitched as a game-changer and a defining vehicle of regional development, as well as a means to ameliorate economic condition of the people, was reduced to a mere escape route for the political and military elite of Pakistan and Iran to vacation in Europe, by means of a highway through Turkey. It was recently aptly pointed-out in a letter in 'The News' daily regarding the RCD, "Half a century on, the (RCD) highway lies buried in government archives and the RCD (itself) is a distant memory."

By 1979, the RCD had become defunct after the Iranian revolution of 1979. However after six years, in 1985, the US again tried to revive the project through its regional agents under the guise of ECO, i.e. the Economic Cooperation Organization, with the same three members at the helm. With this, one asks the question; why was the US pushing its regional agents again and again to form a geo-economic alliance, even after the failure of the previous one. It was because the RCD and the subsequent ECO were crucial economic initiatives in the eyes of the US, in order to obstruct the southern advance of Russia to the Middle East and the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. The US utilized its three regional agents, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, to form an obstructing bloc. However, the ECO, just like the RCD before it, did not achieve the desired

results. This is because agents themselves command nation states, with intrinsically partially conflicting interests. Aligning a vast regional project on the dictates of a major power alone was not enough of a basis to unify the regional agents soundly, which is why the RCD as well as the ECO failed spectacularly.

When the US's economic bulwark against the Soviet Union was flailing, a competing military strategy by the US was gaining traction. In order to wage the US's war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, Pakistan's rulers had spent a considerable amount of time in cultivating a national identity based on the Islamic identity. Where secular ideals had failed earlier, Islam as a unifying factor worked with remarkable success, in the Pakistan experience. Just as previously, when Islamic ideals were able to rally the Muslim masses of the Indian Subcontinent to realize a homeland in the name of Islam, Islamic sentiments rallied the next generation of Muslims in the eighties to inflict a resounding defeat to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. To this day, the liberal circles lament over and spit venom at the whole project as 'Zia's Islamicization.'

Then in 1992, as a direct consequence of the Afghan War, two significant events occurred; facing internal divisions, the Soviet Union collapsed, whilst the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan emerged as independent entities to the east of the Caspian Sea. Once the Soviets had exited the region, the communist influence was diminished, and with it, the dominance of the communist ideology. Soon, the long suppressed allegiance to Islam resurfaced with force within the masses. Indeed before the Soviet occupation, all of these states had been an integral part of the Islamic world, including Afghanistan. They were collectively referred to as the Wilayah of Khorasan. In a region devoid of national identity and ideology, Islam filled the vast vacuum easily. The communities of Central Asia readily surged to embrace Islam as an ideology, much to the annoyance of their despotic rulers, who themselves were relics of the Soviet era.

Parallel to these socio-political developments in the 1990s, geological surveys of the Caspian Sea basin revealed that it held tremendous amounts of hydrocarbon reserves, second only to the Persian Gulf region. The only issue was that the states which possessed these resources, namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were themselves landlocked. The ex-RCD, and current ECO members of Turkey, Pakistan and Iran were tasked by their colonialist masters with exploiting Central Asia's political flux as a genuine power vacuum, with the booty of energy resources. What added to their utility to the colonialists was that the same ECO states happened to be the only routes capable of delivering the hydrocarbons to the industrialized world.

Recognizing this potential, the US, in 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, encouraged the ECO's expansion to include Afghanistan, as well as the newly emergent Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as an "ECO 2.0." It was done with the stated goal of introducing a new pipeline and a common market for goods and services across the region. However, it was all under the long-term US goal of regrouping the Central Asian states for its strategic objectives. Hence, the race towards the Central Asian states became somewhat of a competition between the three original members of ECO. Due to Islam, Central Asia was deeply tied to the history of the Middle East, as well as the Indian Subcontinent. However, the three states preferred decidedly different ideals, colored by their varying situations. Whilst Turkey deliberated strengthening Central Asian links by exporting pan-Turkic ideals, as most of the Central Asian states were Turkic, its sheer distance from the Central Asian heartland became a hurdle. Iran took an interest in promoting its deep historical ties to Central Asia. However, the adherence of Iranians to the Shiite sect of Islam, compared to the Sunni Islam of the Central Asian populations, hampered this ambition. This left Pakistan as the only viable option for the US, as it both adhered to Sunni Islam and was in the immediate vicinity of the Central Asian states. In addition, after the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Pakistan had possession of extensive networking in the region, developed during the war. So compared to Turkey and Iran, Pakistan became the most suitable agent to realize American ambition, acting as an outlet to land-locked Central Asia.

For the independent Islamic statesman, the power vacuum in Central Asia and the strategic significance of Pakistan would present itself as a historic opportunity. However due to the myopic vision of the Pakistani rulers, this opportunity was wasted. What could have been achieved with

the declaration of the Caliphate and the subsequent annexation of Afghanistan along with the Central Asian states, unifying the whole region under the banner of Islam, was reduced to Pakistan's leadership scrambling for lucrative trade deals and joint ventures in cotton, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, agriculture, developing highways and establishing satellite communications with the Central Asian states. This was all under the guidance of Washington. With initial projects ranging from trade, science, education and tourism, the so-called jewel in the crown was the Turkmen pipeline, later referred to as the TAPI pipeline. Securing this pipeline was also one of the reasons of the America's post 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. A trade corridor following the Turkmen pipeline, with another parallel to it, beginning from Peshawar, through Jalalabad, Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and stretching all the way to Tashkent was envisioned in tandem.

However, as with the RCD before it, lacking a unifying vision, Pakistan's honeymoon with the Central Asian states was soon over. With Pakistan's backing of the Taliban to secure the Afghan route, the Central Asian states felt threatened and revived Soviet-era security and economic ties with Russia instead. They even downgraded political and economic relations with Pakistan, after accusing it of supporting jihadists in Afghanistan. What the Pakistani, Turkish and Iranian leaders were failing to realize again is that economic alliances and connectivity plans will never bear fruits, because they are all colonialist plans. They lacked a unifying vision other than supporting a colonialist major power in its regional plan. Economic plans only work under a sound overarching strategic vision. In the case of all of Pakistan's regional connectivity plans, RCD, ECO, ECO 2.0 and the current expansion towards Central Asia, the strategic vision came from the US. So one asks the question; how can the leaders envision that colonialist regional projects ever bear fruits for Pakistan, instead of bearing fruits for the colonialist power alone?

Missing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and humbled by its past failures, Pakistan was then allowed by the US to pursue a more modest policy instead. It marketed its deep-water ports of Gwadar and Karachi as ideal shipping hubs for China, connecting to Xinjiang and providing the oppressive Chinese state with access to the Arabian Sea. Just as the TAPI pipeline was envisioned as the crown jewel for the race towards Central Asia in the nineties, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project was launched in 2015 as yet another 'game changer' for Pakistan. It was the center piece and the critical chain-link of the trillion-dollar Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Having pledged USD 62 Billion and dozens of energy projects, CPEC was hailed as China's largest overseas investment. It was similar in form to all other foreign direct investments in Pakistan since 1970, comprising of a network of roads, bridges, pipelines and railways, running from Kashghar in China, passing through every major city in Pakistan, and connecting to the deep-water ports of Gwadar and Karachi, with the corridor itself being 2700 km from end to end. With political sloganeering referring to Pakistan and China as having all-season and iron-clad ties, with a relationship 'higher than mountains, deeper than ocean and sweeter than honey,' both states tried to secure their respective interests. For China, CPEC opens up a route to the Indian Ocean, allowing it to bypass the potential choke points in the South China Sea. In addition, China is hoping to develop its remote western cities, Kashghar and Urumqi. Somewhat incongruent with the other projects of the BRI, CPEC can be seen as a vehicle for increasing Chinese influence in the South and Central Asian region. For Pakistan, it provided the so-called much-needed foreign direct investment. In Gwadar, at the mouth of the Arabian Sea, a new airport, motorway and railway are being constructed, along with the recently completed vanity projects such as the Gwadar Stadium. The natural deep seaport in Gwadar was redesigned to accommodate large freighters, extending the port's capacity from a modest one million tons to a mammoth 400 million tons.

Pakistan's leadership claimed that the project would stimulate economic growth. With its focus on the western regions of the country, the leadership claimed it might also help improve the overall living conditions in the woefully neglected and underdeveloped Baluchistan, whilst curbing the rising insurgency there through depriving it of the oxygen of resentment and poverty. Also, through the USD 30 billion investment in the energy sector alone, Pakistan was also hoping to address its 7000 megawatts energy shortage and to achieve an additional 3% growth overall. It is no surprise that for the last five years, CPEC was being projected as the remedy for all of Pakistan's ills, to stimulate the economy, reform the energy sector and create employment

simultaneously. However, as with all previous geo-economics focused projects, RCD, ECO, ECO 2.0 and now CPEC, the project is beginning to lose steam, as the US re-orientated its strategy towards China. According to the UK newspaper *The Diplomat*, "Reports indicate that the pace of CPEC projects has been slowing down in Pakistan in recent years... The lack of progress has led to numerous reports about CPEC being at a near standstill in the country." According to a Bloomberg video report, it is stated, "how China's flagship Belt and Road project stalled out." The primary reason cited was that Chinese authorities are reportedly wary of Pakistan's ability to service mounting debt, whilst due to the COVID-19 global situation, China is looking to curtail its global investments under the BRI.

CPEC can now be added to the list of failed geo-economic projects. Pakistani authorities have been insisting time and again that the debt situation is under control, but it is not, as interest payments balloon. Mindful of angering the Chinese authorities, the rulers have ignored the plight of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. They have undermined sovereignty by ceding critical infrastructure of the country to China. Instead of curbing the Baloch insurgency, the project has actually aggravated it by building resentment towards a Chinese intrusion. There has been no substantial job creation in the country due to the project, even after seven years. All in all, it is no surprise that CPEC can now be added to a line of regional geo-economic connectivity projects that have not failed to disappoint. The CPEC is a colonialist plan in its essence. Its strategic as well as economic benefits for China far exceed the modest benefits for Pakistan. As for the US, it fit neatly within its policy for China at the time, to engage it in economic projects so China is invested in the region, diverting it from more aggressive posturing in theater of the Pacific Rim.

In the face of the glaring failure of the north-south CPEC project and new strategic requirements of the US regarding China, Pakistan's rulers have now jumped to discussions about reviving the east-west corridor again, i.e. the route linking India, through Pakistan and Afghanistan to Central Asia. Indeed, the discussion about horizontal regional connectivity as opposed to China's vertical regional connectivity has been initiated by Pakistan's leadership according to US requirements. The US has recalibrated its own response to China, moving on from embracing it as a partner in the region, to a more overtly aggressive stance to contain it. Carrots are replaced with sticks. The recent visit of Imran Khan to Uzbekistan, as well as the claim of US officials that the US wishes to formulate an economic partnership between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian states, both indicate that the US wishes to maintain its influence in Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of its forces from the country. It is trying to do so by stabilizing its threatened and exposed influence, through developing economic stakes to win-over local resistance. Going by past experience, this amounts to little more than flogging a dead horse. Nothing can and will come out of this rebranded geo-economics endeavor, except for the execution of a revised colonialist plan for the region by the agent rulers, which weakens Pakistan further. This is whilst the corrupt in the political and military leadership stand to gain a economic benefits and political chips in return, whilst the masses will face bitter disappointment, after the overly-inflated hype. Geo-economics has been a failed strategy overall and not just for the Muslim world. The European Union is a huge failure, contributing to the reduction of the European states' stature to a marginal one on the world stage.

There is a fundamental flaw with Pakistan's approach whenever it becomes a part of any colonialist geo-economics regional connectivity project, be it the RCD, ECO, ECO 2.0, CPEC or the as-of-yet unnamed geo-economics east-west corridor project. What Pakistan's leadership has failed to realize is that power and influence is not achieved through economic connectivity alone, but through a cohesive, harmonizing power, with economic strength as a mere component of it. In other words, the underlying flaw is that all of Pakistan's attempts projects lacked a unifying vision, both within and outside its borders. Adherence to the nation state model automatically handicaps the rulers on many fronts. There is an inherent instability in many regions which each nation state is unable to overcome, as it competes for its own course. Each nation state is never in full control of the situation inside or outside its borders completely, pitching its interests against those of others over time and in changing circumstances. What the policymakers in Pakistan have ignored is that Islamic ruling was the reason the Central Asian states had such strong connections with the Indian Subcontinent in the past, which is absent in the contemporary era. Islam was implemented in its totality, with no nation-state boundaries preventing the exchange of goods and services between the Wilayah of Khorasan and the

Wilayah of Hind. Islam acted as the stabilizing force within Muslim regions, ensuring security and vitality of trade routes, be it within the Wilayahs of the Khilafah, or routes connecting it from outside its sphere of influence, such as the ancient Silk Road. Islam empowered the past Waalis with immense authority to achieve so much more than their current handicapped Western agent counterparts.

The withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan presented a golden opportunity for Pakistan, which was squandered by the agent rulers by implementing the colonialist vision. Today, the recent withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan affords a similar opportunity. However, it can be easily squandered, if Islam is not the basis for the regional vision. Hence in order to fully realize the immense economic and political potential of the region, Islam must be adopted in ruling again. Going by the past experience of the Muslims of the region, whenever Islam was the rallying call, we were able to achieve the nigh impossible, from obtaining a new homeland in the name of Islam, to defeating a super power. However, instead of just limiting Islam to a slogan and driving regional ventures on geo-economics, the Deen needs to be revived as an ideology. Islam must be the driving force behind any regional project, which can only occur when it is implemented in its totality in the form of the Caliphate. If, Allah (swt) willing, the Caliphate is initiated from Pakistan, then adjacent areas of the region can be annexed relatively easily, spanning across Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, all the way up to Kazakhstan, stretching from the plains of Siberia to the Arabian Sea. In that massive, continent-sized Caliphate, Islam will act as a unifying force as well as a force of stability. Islam would naturally quell any insurgencies by removing the root cause of the grievances and replacing it with a cause that extends beyond the narrow confines of Dunya, to the never-ending Aakhira. The Caliph of the Muslims would enjoy immense authority with respect to policymaking. The Caliphate would possess enormous strategic depth, as well as receive a significant boost in manpower, resources, funding and logistics, compared to the current divided nation states. This would level the playing field compared to any power in its immediate vicinity, whether China, Russia or India. Moreover, the Islamic Caliphate will have the distinct advantage over all others of being the sole power based on the ideology revealed by Allah (swt), Al-Aleem and Al-Khabeer. So let those who are true to the vision of Islam's dominance, work for the re-establishment of the Khilafah (Caliphate) on the Method of Prophethood.

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