

Khan's Strange Trip to Moscow

News:

On his return from Russia, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan brushed aside international criticism of his meeting with Putin and proceeded to put up a stern defence of his actions in a televised address to the Pakistani people. He painstakingly described how Pakistan had to pursue an independent foreign policy—a reference to the lopsided relations with America, which he criticized. He also labored on demonstrating that his visit to Beijing and Moscow should be seen in this context.

Comment:

Khan justified his visit to Moscow by enumerating bilateral deals with Russia encompassing technology, wheat and gas. Although, it was unclear how a long-term project like a gas pipeline—first inked in 2015 where Russia would only provide 25% of the \$1.5b cost for construction—would meet Pakistan's immediate energy demands given the rising price of oil and gas in the international markets. Subsequently, the visit raises searching questions about Khan's perceived ill-timed meeting with Putin.

One possible explanation that has gone unnoticed in the mainstream press is that Putin does not want any distractions while he prosecutes his war in Ukraine. Putin is focused on securing the Russian enclaves inside Eastern Ukraine—even if it means assimilating these separatist republics into mother Russia—and at the most to supplant a compliant government in Kyiv that rebuffs EU expansion and eschews NATO admission. In sum, western Ukraine would be a vassal state that adopts the position of neutrality towards the West. Anything beyond this means that Putin simply does not possess the troop numbers to simultaneously enforce regime change, fight a protracted insurgency and to absorb Ukraine.

Any subversion of the Central Asian states would not only dent Russian aspirations in Ukraine but also open up another front that will stretch Russian troops. The recent coup in Kazakhstan, which Russia blamed on foreign powers, is a stark reminder how quickly the situation could unravel unless precautions are taken. It is well known that Taliban have the propensity to undermine the security of the Central Asian states. After the withdrawal of US troops, the Taliban pledged that Afghanistan would not be used for this purpose. However, Russia is acutely aware that Pakistan's involvement is indispensable when it comes to ensuring Taliban fulfill their promise. Against this backdrop, Khan's meeting with Putin combined with his statements of an independent foreign policy alludes to a possible deal that entails preventing the Taliban to destabilize Central Asian states.

If assuaging Western diplomats over his visit to Russia was proving difficult, Khan also has to contend with the IMF regarding his \$1.5b fuel subsidies, which is widely seen in Pakistan as an attempt to placate the electorate ahead of general elections scheduled for next year. The IMF has set tough conditions and it could become extremely difficult to qualify for future tranches should Pakistan's projected economic growth fail to materialize in the current economic climate. Another aspect of the IMF deal complicating matters for Khan is compliance with FATF conditions enshrined in the structural adjust programme. The longer the Ukrainian crisis persists, it is most probable that America will use both the IMF and FATF to punish Khan's overtures to Putin.

No matter how hard Pakistan's civil and military leadership tries to etch out an independent course in foreign affairs, they always seem to end up with a losing hand in power politics between Russia, America and China.

The only way Pakistan can follow an independent foreign policy and also play power politics with great powers is through the re-establishment of the Khilafah Rashida. Khan often talks about the riyast (leadership) of Madina but has failed to learn from the independent foreign policy of the Messenger of Allah (saw) and the Khulfaha who came after him.

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