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Pakistan and BRICS:

An inevitable development to US inattention

Why should Islamabad continue to beg for favors from an inattentive and even hostile Washington, especially when there is another global pole that looks politically and economically more inviting?

Is Pakistan about to join the BRICS in earnest? Is it stepping off its US-centric trajectory and reassessing its foreign policy priorities in response to Washington's increasing interest in cozying up to India – or is there a tactic in play to force the Americans to revert attention back to Islamabad?

Experts and scholars believe that Pakistan is walking a tightrope and cannot afford to rock the boat right now, especially when it finds itself in dire need of financial support from its traditional partners. This is a critical moment for the economically depleted South Asian nuclear power. By all accounts, the US appears to have moved on from this relationship – for one, it no longer relies on Pakistan's assistance since pulling out of Afghanistan following a deal with the Taliban in Doha.

In truth, the change in the US's stance toward Pakistan has left the country out in the cold, to the point where even Afghanistan has started to bite the hand that fed it so long and afforded the Taliban to take the reins in Kabul, not once, but twice.

To counterbalance China's growing influence in the region, in recent years, the US has quickly sought out a closer strategic partnership with India, especially in defense and security matters. Islamabad has not weathered the American approach to India well, particularly

considering India's efforts to strengthen its position in Afghanistan and its aspiration for dominance in South Asia and beyond.

Dr. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi, Chairman of the Department of International Relations at the University of Peshawar, tells *The Cradle* that Pakistan's financial woes, internal strife, growing religious intolerance, and political instability leave the country in a bit of a pickle, making it tough to find solid ground for navigating its foreign policy in the current geopolitical landscape.

"There might be a few hiccups and tweaks along the way, in line with the daily ups and downs, but they can't really be called a policy shift in the grand scheme of things," he noted.

Soharwordi points out that when it comes to Pakistan's financial and economic problems, the US holds the cards in the global monetary institutions that are crucial lifelines for Islamabad:

"As the saying goes, a beggar can't be a chooser; right now, Pakistan is in a tight spot with no room to maneuver during this crucial moment when its economy is scraping the bottom of the barrel."

As he notes, shifting gears when one is in a tight spot, and assistance from traditional allies is still up in the air would be a recipe for disaster. "Pakistan doesn't have a leg to stand on with the key players in the BRICS, so what's the silver lining for the country even if the winds blow in their favor?" he quipped.

Was Khan's visit to Moscow a turning point?

Taking a cue from the incarcerated former Prime Minister [Imran Khan's surprise visit](#) to Moscow in 2022, Pakistan has taken several steps since then that are inconsistent with the cash-strapped South Asian country's known foreign policy dimensions.

Khan did not take the initiative to travel to Russia at a critical juncture on his own. He would not have undertaken this visit, which infuriated the US and its allies and, in Khan's view, toppled his government, if the powerful army had not given the green light for this maiden diplomatic initiative.

Yet following Khan's initiative, Pakistan has taken several bold steps that suggest Islamabad is either gradually aligning itself with the Iran-China-Russia trio or seriously seeking to expand its geopolitical options, as have many Global South states with the rise of a competing pole. Several events that have unfolded in recent months indicate a potential new trend.

In June, [Pakistan declared](#) that it would join the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-km-long multimodal transportation network connecting Central Asia,

North Europe, India, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia - saying that Islamabad was doing so at Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation.

“Pakistan, in principle, has agreed to join the INSTC and started the relevant procedure,” said Pakistan’s Ambassador to Russia, Muhammad Khalid Jamali, while addressing the International IT Forum in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia, in June. He also indicated that Pakistan had requested assistance from Russian friends in joining the BRICS.

Officially, Islamabad announced it applied for [BRICS membership](#) in late 2023. While confirming the move, the Pakistan foreign office described BRICS as an "important group of developing countries" and hoped that by joining the alliance, Pakistan could play an important role in furthering international cooperation and revitalizing “inclusive multilateralism.”

Even though Indian officials did not publicly react to Islamabad's declaration, Pakistan may face tough resistance from some founding BRICS members, including India, which, according to [Mushahid Hussain Sayed](#), chairperson of Pakistan Senate’s foreign affairs committee, may play a "spoiler" over Pakistan's application for membership. Not that this is something new.

"India will always have challenges, whether in politics, diplomacy, or cricket. But they are not the sole player in the game,” Mushahid told a media outlet. India's alliance with the American or Israeli camp is more evident in the current Middle East conflict than it is in the larger global south. India is on the wrong side of history when you consider the big picture, he added.

Then, in August, Pakistan surprised many by [declaring a day of mourning](#) for the assassination of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran at the end of July, an attack Iran blamed on Israel, which escalated tensions in the region, even as the Gaza war raged.

These developments created the impression that Pakistan's military leadership seems inclined to throw its weight behind Iran, Russia, and China in the regional scenario. Pakistan is collaborating with Russia and China as part of wider regional dynamics, as well as resolving some of Iran's border concerns.

"The US reacted sharply to Imran Khan's visit to Russia in 2022, but a decade ago, the US and its NATO allies preferred to ignore the country's rebalancing efforts with China and Russia—two rising powers in the region—because at that time relations with Pakistan were critical for their supplies in Afghanistan," Tahir Khan, a geopolitical analyst and expert on Afghanistan, tells *The Cradle*.

Khan says the US began to exert pressure on Pakistan to roll back its policy toward China and Russia shortly after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Following the April government change in Islamabad, he adds, Pakistan has shown greater caution in terms of its relations with China and Russia:

"The perception of policy change in Pakistan does not hold water in the context of the lukewarm progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Islamabad's inability to address China's security concerns, deteriorating Pakistan-Afghan relations, and Pakistan's utter failure to match China's increasing thrust on investment and economic linkages with Afghanistan."

Khan adds that engagement with Russia has remained dormant following unverified reports about Pakistan's weapon linkages with Ukraine. "On the contrary, Pakistan's archrival India has done its balancing act more effectively than Pakistan."

A not-so-friendly US

The US State Department imposed [sanctions](#) on a Chinese research institute and several additional companies on 13 September, a move that appears to be a part of a continuous effort to exert pressure on both China and Pakistan. The US claimed that these companies were involved in supplying Pakistan's ballistic missile program.

In October 2023, Washington had already imposed such measures against at least three Chinese companies for supplying missile-applicable items to Pakistan.

According to State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller, the Beijing Research Institute of Automation for Machine Building Industry collaborated with Pakistan to procure equipment for testing rocket motors for the Shaheen-3 and Ababeel missiles, as well as potentially for larger systems.

In addition to Pakistan-based Innovative Equipment and a Chinese national, the sanctions also targeted China-based firms Hubei Huachangda Intelligent Equipment Co., Universal Enterprise, and Xi'an Longde Technology Development Co. for the intentional transfer of equipment under missile technology restrictions, according to Miller.

[Pakistan's Foreign Office](#) vehemently denounced the US action as unfair and politicized, responding in a tone never heard before. In a statement on Saturday, September 14, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Mumtaz Zehra Baloch claimed that the US had listed several commercial entities last year "merely on suspicion" because the items for which the companies were sanctioned were not listed under any export control regime, and they considered them sensitive under broad, catch-all provisions.

Without naming India and Israel, Baloch wrote, "It is well known that some governments have readily bypassed licensing restrictions for advanced military technologies to their favored states while claiming stringent nonproliferation laws for others." Baloch said US sanctions were "double standards and discriminatory" and "undermine the legitimacy of global nonproliferation regimes, raise military asymmetries, and jeopardize world peace and security."

How much longer will Islamabad tread water with Washington before switching sides to save itself? This is the very same sort of treadmill that countries like China, Russia, and Iran walked – all of them, at some point or other, sought to trust US goodwill before realizing that Washington had none in stock.

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