

Winter Olympics and the New Great Game

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Context

Prime minister Imran Khan's February visit to Beijing, after nearly two years, is being seen as mutual opportunity for adding new impetus to Pak-China 'all-weather strategic cooperative partnership.' Fairly so, as it is time both sides got going on value-addition to their socioeconomic interests and gains.

All the same, an immediate as well as a long-term impact of the event on geopolitics of Asia and the greater region is inevitable, particularly in the wake of prevalent so-called new great game among major world powers.

This essay analyses this gambit of geopolitics besides bringing forth the benefits for states of eschewing differences and promoting winning solutions for inclusive development.

Pak-China Bonhomie

The three-day visit is expected to refresh the leadership's resolve to work together and 'advance the objective of building a closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era.'

Besides other experts, Special Assistant to PM on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Khalid Mansoor's presence in the entourage is a clear indicator of substantive dialogue on the bilateral mega-plan. Given strategic nature of key plans and the increasing domestic opposition on government's measured pace on CPEC, both sides are bound to publicly lay more cards on the table.

Contrary to politically motivated opprobrium that borders propaganda, CPEC is changing the development landscape of Pakistan in an unprecedented manner. The plan envisions massive multimodal development and regional connectivity in an era of growing appetite of States for inter- and intra-regional trade and energy supplies.

The establishment of infrastructure and industrial sector under the first phase of CPEC has boosted economy through better linkages and employment creation. At the very least, the awe-inspiring network of roads and motorways spiraling through the length and breadth of Pakistan has reduced distances and unencumbered people from all social strata in a number of ways.

Likewise, the second phase of CPEC is sustainably pacing ahead. At the 2019 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on Boosting Connectivity to Explore New Sources of Growth, PM Khan had proposed digital, cultural, knowledge-based and labor oriented connectivity as special focus areas.

The recent launch of Pak-China Business Investment Forum in Islamabad will introduce new avenues of cooperation. Consisting of eighteen Chinese and nineteen Pakistani companies, the Forum's objective is 'to promote sustainable investment, export industry and development of modern technology in Pakistan.'

Geopolitical Prism

In parallel to the continuing win-win setups exists the tendency of major powers to gain competitive strategic advantage, safeguard self-interest, enhance military power, and ensure their strategic influence near and far – Eurasia, the Middle East, and the Asia Pacific regions top the menu. Like the recent first of two Summits for Democracy powered by the United States, the politics of participation at the Chinese Winter Olympics are no exception.

Beijing will host tens of prominent world leaders from Western bloc and Belt and Road countries. These include France, Poland, Serbia, Luxembourg, Russia, Monaco, Bosnia, Cambodia, Mongolia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Ecuador, and Central Asian States. The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres and World Health Organization Head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus are also among representatives of international institutions attending the Games.

However, the United States-led diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics by members of the Five Eyes Alliance – Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand – finds connectivity with geopolitics being played in these three key regions:

Eurasia

The crisis in Ukraine is the latest overlay of dark shadow cast on geopolitical landscape. The U.S. wants to encroach further into Russia's geographical buffers around Moscow's core territory. Threat from Russia is NATO's *raison d'état* and crisis over Ukraine serves that end. Ukraine's membership of NATO is Russia's redline that the Treaty shall cross at its own peril.

There is a silver lining. NATO has understood this and has kept its rhetoric to Russia about unprecedented consequences limited to economic pressure. Likewise, Russia has

reiterated that it is not making preparations to invade Ukraine. Germany's reluctance to firmly stand against Russia is another factor in NATO's climb down from walking its talk.

The U.S. has aired concerns that Germany is an unreliable ally – a complaint that it may soon raise about India. The American expectations about German commitment to NATO notwithstanding, Berlin is more concerned with uninterrupted supply of Russian energy and construction of 764-mile long Nord Stream-2 natural gas pipeline than the American interest of foraying deeper into Russian zone of influence. The pipeline connects Russia to Germany and will be functional as soon as Berlin's regulators clear it. Chancellor Merkel's successor Olaf Scholz has reportedly given a vague commitment to mothball Nord Stream-2 if Russia invades Ukraine.

Middle East

The U.S. is attempting to close multiple fronts in an effort to avoid strategic overstretch and focus on primary threats. Hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and disentangling from Middle East are means to that end.

Since America dropped the ball in Afghanistan, the country faces a serious risk of economic collapse. It remains to be seen if China and Russia will pick the tab of power vacuum.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and impending collapse will affect Pakistan the most because the country is a historical refuge for the distressed for last five decades. Shall Pakistan's fledgling economy and increasing duress from India allow it to offer its traditional hospitality to the oft-unappreciative Afghans?

The Biden Administration is interested in shifting its focus from Middle East but complications created by former President Trump are an unwanted albatross around Biden's neck. In reality, Biden Administration has been as inflexible in negotiating with Iran and returning to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the so-called Iran nuclear deal – as its predecessor.

If America does not return to JCPOA and find a middle-ground with Iran, it risks remaining bogged and frittering its economic and military capital that it needs elsewhere. Instability in Iran is not in anyone's interest. The sooner the JCPOA is revived the better for the region and beyond.

Asia-Pacific

The New Great Game between China and the U.S. is also being played into the Winter Olympics in Beijing. The U.S. competition with China has intensified since 2005 and successive regimes in Washington have considered Beijing the principal threat to American hegemony. Though conflict is in no one's interest, as related in my recent book *The Road to Balance in Asia Pacific: Geopolitics of American Rebalancing and Chinese Belt and Road Initiative*.

The upcoming U.S. National Security Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review are likely to elaborate this in clear terms. The U.S. Secretary of State Blinken was recently clarion in characterizing the relationship as 'adversarial when it must be.'

The U.S. has long concluded that it cannot contain China alone. It has placed the bets on India as the counterweight to China. However, there are major wrinkles in this approach because New Delhi is taking advantage of Washington's apparent weakness. India knows that U.S. needs it and has thus raised the price tag for the services.

Interestingly, India is not likely to live up to its promise to contain China. The solid beating it received at Chinese hands in Galwan last year is the latest evidence. Washington and its Western allies have paid more to New Delhi than latter deserves to receive. This investment also exacerbates South Asian security dilemma.

While the U.S. has sanctioned a NATO ally for military trade with Russia, it has given exceptional waiver to New Delhi for buying Russian S-400 missile systems. India has had USD 120 billion trade with China last year, which outstrips that with the U.S. Never has a superpower relied so heavily on a State that is unreliable and domestically so unstable.

Crossroads

The Winter Olympics is not the only arena for the Great Game between the U.S. and China. Pakistan shall continue to be in that vast playing field for two major reasons. One, if America develops an adversarial relationship with China, as latter's closest ally, Pakistan will be in American crosshairs. Two, the U.S. is likely to employ old political and economic leverages to target Pakistan and will look the other way once India scales up the grey-hybrid war to destabilize Pakistan.

Pakistan stands at the crossroads and it is becoming increasingly challenging for it to balance relations with the two superpowers. It requires statesmanship and deft diplomacy to walk this tight rope like it did in the 1970s while facilitating the historic China-U.S. rapprochement. However, the challenges have increased manifold now.

Luckily, PM Imran Khan and President Xi Jinping are dynamic leaders who have the charisma to overcome the odds. Once they meet in Beijing during the Winter Olympics and Spring Festival they will unveil some aspects of their long-term strategic partnership.

Unbeknownst and unbelievable for some is the fact that Pakistan is at the centrestage of world politics. It is on the route to acquiring few more components to this résumé, such as a thriving economy. While its strategic partnership with China is a great asset, Pakistan needs to foster a collective national culture of hard work, perseverance, sacrifice, and strategic wisdom. Simply put, self-reliance and economic revival should be the top priority for years to come.

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