



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Pakistan: An Unfailing State in a Failing Neighborhood

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The relentless geometry of our globe comprises two kinds of states – some wealthy and others necessary. Pakistan fulfills the credentials of the latter one. However, to reduce its role between the US–Iran mediation and enabling a subsequent ceasefire to merely a diplomatic victory is to miss a deeper rhythm of history at work. This was instinct rooted in memory and geography playing its role where the world had no room for error. In his books, *Prisoners of Geography* and *The Power of Geography*, Tim Marshall encapsulates the sagacious truth that states do not choose their burdens; they inherit them, and Pakistan is no exception.

To its West lies a restless and embattled Iran; and to its East is India – a country being run by far-right BJP extremists. In the north lies a calculating and patient China; in its South are the warm waters that carry the lifeblood of the global economy. This is not comfortable; this is a demanding geography. And Pakistan has forged its own style of Survivalist Diplomacy. The ceasefire it brokered was not a charity, rather a necessity, as instability in Iran can seep into Balochistan, uncovering old wounds and turning fault lines into fractures.

But there is something more subtle and paradoxical in how Islamabad dealt its cards. Where once Otto von Bismarck found reason in isolating adversaries, Pakistan thought it smart to pull a Reverse Bismarck – not dividing adversaries but

converging Washington and Tehran. Actors who speak contrasting dialects of power found a translator in Pakistan. Not because Pakistan is a powerhouse, but because it is trusted just enough by all and distrusted just little enough by each. While it is keenly aware of its place in the hierarchy of nations, Pakistan refuses to be confined by it. Daniel Yergin, in his book *The New Map*, explores the intellectual spine behind such bold maneuvers. Energy is not a commodity only; it is the bloodstream of geopolitics. The Strait of Hormuz is the narrowest artery of this bloodstream; when it narrows, the world does not die right away, but it is doomed to suffocate inevitably.

Pakistan was well aware of this. While the United States – tugged by the inward pull of the Shale Gale (a rapid and transformative surge in America's natural gas and oil production from shale formations) – is less dependent on oil from the Gulf than it once was, it remains the reluctant custodian of a global system that still relies on that flow. China, on the other hand, drinks from those ancient wells in the Middle East, and so both superpowers share an unspoken and quiet interest to keep the oil flowing.

Through naval vigilance, diplomatic backchannels, and calibrated restraint, Pakistan seized its moment of leverage, becoming the guarantor of that flow – not the owner of the tap, but the guardian of that corridor – speaking a language both Beijing and Washington understand clearly: stability. This is how Pakistan

simultaneously remains both a troubled and pivotal state. Critics will always – from a distance – highlight its economic woes, security threats, political crises and declare it wanting; yet to confuse internal strain with external irrelevance is a grave error. In the unforgiving arithmetic of geopolitics, balance sheets matter less than positioning.

Pakistan is mired in competing imperatives: Sunni/Shia, East/West, Maritime and Continental. It embraces the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, keeps a functional familiarity with Tehran, maintains a symbiotic relationship with the United States, and ensures a perpetual all-weather alignment with the People’s Republic of China. Most countries would disintegrate in sustaining even one of those relationships without contradiction, but Pakistan sustains all four – imperfectly, yes – but persistently.

This persistence is power. The secret wisdom of diplomacy is to become someone who cannot be ignored. Over the

years, this struggling nation has mastered that craft, not by design alone, but by the confluence of the hard lessons of history and the quiet coercion of geography. So when it steps into a crisis and steadies the table, it is not performing beyond its capacity. It is performing exactly as its geography demands.

Call it a failed state at your own peril. Because most states fail loudly, collapsing under the weight of their own contradictions. Others endure quietly, absorbing shocks, adapting, and recalibrating. Pakistan belongs to the latter category: an unfailing state in a failing neighborhood, a hinge upon which larger doors reluctantly turn. In this unforgiving theatre, to underestimate such a state is not merely an analytical mistake; it is a strategic one. In the words of Otto von Bismarck, the astute Prussian statesman and diplomat, “The statesman’s task is to hear God’s footsteps marching through history, and to try and catch onto His coat-tails as He marches past.”

