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Americans and Saudis: hands off Pakistan's pipeline please!

It is time for US to get real & know that countries will pursue their goals rather than those preferred by Washington.

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Now and then, as though out of sheer boredom, the United States shoots itself in the foot and loses the occasional goodwill it creates with aid programmes. Consider the latest: Secretary Hilary Clinton says that “As we are ratcheting up pressure on Iran, it seems somewhat inexplicable that Pakistan would be trying to negotiate a pipeline with it”. Appearing before Congress, she threatened that sanctions could be imposed by the US on Pakistan’s precarious economy, and these would be “particularly damaging” and “further undermine their economic status”.

One wonders why Mrs Clinton finds Pakistan’s attempt to tap into its gas-rich neighbour “inexplicable”. In fact, there is no mystery. Half of Pakistan’s energy needs are met from gas, but only 30 per cent of gas is domestically produced. Natural gas runs the country’s electricity generating plants, powers its factories, and is used as fuel for cars, buses and trucks.

Without additional energy supplies, social chaos and disruption lies in the months and years ahead. Electricity shortfalls sometimes reach as high as 6,000MW, meaning that 40 per cent of the demand is unmet. Daily blackouts have gutted industrial production, closed markets, and CNG is rationed in spite of a huge price hike. Power riots broke out two weeks ago in Lahore. In October, protesters against power outages held up a train in Gujranwala, ordered passengers onto the platform, and set three coaches on fire.

Iran’s gas could be critical for avoiding mass rioting and social breakdown. Should it actually come through, the proposed 56 inch diameter, 2,100-kilometres long IP pipeline would deliver a whopping 750 million cubic feet of gas per day from Iran’s South Pars gas field, located near Iran’s southern city of Asalouyeh. This could become Pakistan’s jugular vein or, more accurately, its windpipe.

Expectedly, Secretary Clinton’s threats have drawn a strong reaction from Pakistani officials and leaders, with each trying to stand taller than the other. All this comes at a time when Pakistan-US relations are at a dangerous low. Quite apart from everything else, threatening Pakistan is poor diplomacy because it is reacting to something that, at the moment, is no more than a possibility.

Although the pipeline project’s formal completion date is December 2014, a detailed feasibility plan is still being worked out and the source of funding is unclear. In July 2011, President Ahmadinejad has offered to fund construction of the 761 kilometres inside Pakistani territory. Iran declared at the time that it had laid the pipeline on its side to within 50 kilometres of Pakistan’s border. But the Iranian offer has to be taken with a good pinch of salt because Iran’s economic difficulties are rapidly mounting. China’s largest bank, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, has backed out from its earlier commitment. Currently the Pakistan government is negotiating with Gazprom, the Russian gas and oil giant. Nothing is clear.

The threats to Pakistan clearly violate the principle of fairness. Let’s say that Iran is indeed a “bad guy”, and that it is wrong to trade with bad guys. But, by this logic is it okay for the US to conduct \$500 billion dollars of trade with China annually, a country that it alleges — perhaps correctly — of violating human rights? What about the planned \$80 billion US arm sales to Saudi Arabia, a country that officially does not accept the right to religious freedom and treats its women abysmally? The IP gas pipeline, on the other hand, involves a piddling \$1.5 billion and brings obvious advantages to Pakistan.

US antagonism to the IP pipeline comes, of course, because of Iran’s nuclear programme. This is why India, China and Turkey are also being hectorated into reducing their imports of Iranian crude oil. In 2008, US pressure forced India to pull out of the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, also known as the “Peace Pipeline”.

Suppose, for argument's sake, Iran's secret agenda is indeed that which the US alleges — i.e. to make nuclear weapons. If true, I find it personally regrettable. The world needs less, not more, nuclear weapons. It is in Iran's long-term interest to shelve such ambitions and get on with improving the lives of ordinary Iranians. Yet, in all fairness, there are nine other nuclear states in the world with America's perennial ally, Israel, being among them.

But let us not blame the Americans alone. Another nation has now stepped in to discourage the construction of the IP pipeline. The kings and princes of Saudi Arabia — who had earlier urged the US to destroy Iran's nuclear programme by launching military strikes and “cut off the head of the snake” — are making their presence felt here in Islamabad.

Two weeks ago, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's deputy foreign minister, Prince Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, sought to persuade Pakistan to abandon the IP pipeline and cancel electricity/oil import deals with Iran. Although details have not appeared in the press, Abdul Aziz apparently offered some kind of a financial bailout as the quid pro quo.

But Pakistan needs energy security, not more loans. The Saudi attempt to create divisions and distrust with a neighboring country is plainly insidious and deserved a riposte from Pakistan's leaders — one no less stout than the one delivered to the Americans. The Saudi plan is just as unworkable as the TAPI pipeline, which the US is pushing as an alternative to the IP pipeline. TAPI would run through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. But with Afghanistan likely to be embroiled indefinitely in civil war after 2014, only a wild optimist can believe that a pipeline traversing its hostile and intractable terrain could provide secure oil supplies.

It is time for the US to get real and know that countries will pursue their goals rather than those preferred by Washington. John Foster Dulles is dead, as is Ronald Reagan — strong-arm tactics have seen their day. Instead American diplomacy needs to show sensitivity, and factor in the needs of the countries it deals with. Else the U.S shall isolate itself away from a goal that is truly important, the fight against global terrorism.

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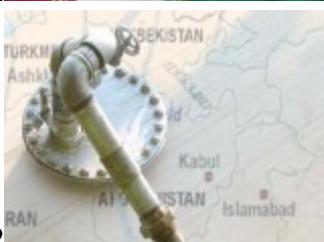
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