

Relations with Central Asian Republics (CARs): Impressions in the Senate of Pakistan

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Abstract

Senate of Pakistan being a part of the Parliament as an upper chamber called as the House of Federation bears the mandate to form the foreign policy and thus to determine the course of country's relations with other states. It also can monitor and review the developments in the sphere of country's international relations. In the wake of many challenges to this role of parliament in Pakistan that is inclined to authoritarian set up, the federal Senate often tries to indulge in the discussions relating to the state's international affairs. This paper is a review of Pakistani Senate's deliberations about the re-advent of Central Asian Republics (CARs) in 1991. These republics opened up new prospects for Pakistan in its international outlook. The main concept of the relationship with CARs was their connectivity with Pakistan via Afghanistan. Thus the paper also reveals how the connectivity with CARs through trouble ridden Afghanistan was observed by Pakistani lawmakers of upper house. Their viewpoints about CARs and connectivity with them as appeared in the discussions of house as well as its committees have been analysed here. The debates of the House (Hansards) being the primary source of parliamentary studies have been examined in order to find out viewpoints and proposals of various individual senators or their parties

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regarding the relations of Pakistan with CARs. The study being historical in nature aims at building a broader narrative in terms of institutionalization of the Senate of Pakistan regarding international relations.

Key Words: Foreign Policy, Institutionalization, Parliament, Connectivity, Senate of Pakistan

Introduction

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), marred with socio-economic ailments and dogged of failure in controlling the resistance to its forces in Afghanistan, collapsed and finally ceased to exist on 26 December 1991. Russian Federation was naturally the heir of USSR but before the final drop scene of split, some republics of Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, which are colloquially referred to as the "stans") managed to get independence. Of these, Uzbekistan declared independence after the failed coup attempt in Moscow on 31 August 1991 under President Islam Karimov. Then Tajikistan following unrest and socio-economic crisis of about two years, got independence on 9 September 1991. Thirdly Turkmenistan, though ill-prepared for independence on 27 October of the same year, was forced by the fragmentation of Soviet Union to hold referendum that approved its independence. Then there was Kazakhstan where an aborted coup attempt started in August 1991 ultimately ended in declaration of independence on 16 December 1991. Finally, Kyrgyzstan also gained full independence on 25 December 1991.

Pakistan, being a neighboring state of turmoil-ridden Afghanistan that in turn was connected with CARs, had been supporter to the Afghan *Mujahideen* (Muslim warriors) who had been fighting all through 1980s against the Soviet forces. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989 followed by the Soviet collapse, Pakistani leadership saw new prospects of relationship with special reference to connectivity with the newly born Central Asian Republics (CARs). All channels of press and media were filled with the statements regarding achievements of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the

connectivity with CARs was labelled as a fruit of Pakistan's role in Afghan conflict. The diplomacy too was mobilized in order to enhance the modes and methods of connectivity. Ultimately all institutions of state were indulged in the narrative of connectivity.

New Prospects of CARs for Pakistan

With the emergence of CARs the prospects of new international organization emerged. Pakistan quickly joined the already existing regional Muslim countries like Iran and Turkey in forming new international alliance and organization including CARs as well. The volume of Regional Cooperation Development (RCD) was extended with new nomenclature of Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and inclusion of CARs in them. The foreign Minister of Pakistan told the upper house that the first Summit of ECO held in Tehran from 16-17 February admitted Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as full members. In addition, the Summit approved a Preferential Tariff Agreement among the members states of the ECO which would lead to increased trade between them and close cooperation in economic and commercial fields. It was expected the ECO would emerge as an effective vehicle for enhancing economic and commercial cooperation among the countries of the region and bringing them close together. Pakistan also signed a number of agreements with the CARs for the promotion of mutual cooperation in economic, commercial, scientific and technological fields. A PIA link was established between Pakistan and Tashkent (Uzbekistan). Pakistan briskly opened its embassies in Alma Ata (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan) and planned to open the missions in Ashkabad (Turkmenistan) and Baku (Azerbaijan).¹

Senate of Pakistan

The Senate of Pakistan being the house of federation is indirectly elected chamber of the parliament of Pakistan. It was restored along with house of people "the National Assembly of Pakistan" on the withdrawal of martial law in 1985. Till the emergence of

CARs the restored Sente had passed six years of its life after restoration. Half of its members were re-elected in 3rd March 1988 and other half was re-elected on 14th March 1991, some months before the emergence of CARs.

The Claim of Contribution in the Emergence of CARs

As soon as the CARs emerged the Pakistani Senators started to give Pakistan the credit of the developments which resulted in emergence of CARs. Pakistan's contribution in the war in Afghanistan fought against Soviet forces was considered as major cause of the re-advent of the CARs. The leading treasury Pakistani senators boasted that in the result of Pakistanis' struggle and toil the USSR became distinct and ultimately was broken into pieces.² Khawaja Asif, a prominent treasury senator, remarked that CARs were liberated only as a result of Afghan Jihad. To this government lawmaker, it was Pakistan that fired the first shot in the Afghan Jihad that resulted in breakup of the USSR.³

The Impressions about CARs

Both government and opposition senators, due to their different impressions about CARs, reacted divergently on the first visit of Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Pakistan in February 1992. He was first head of any Central Asian state who arrived Pakistan. One of the treasury benches welcomed him signifying Kazakhstan as only Islamic country that was atomic power. The senator passed these welcome remarks when he was talking about the conditions of privatization and public property in Pakistan. He exemplified Kazakhstan's success in manufacturing atomic weapons and said that the country become an atomic country owing to its progress in public property.⁴ Baloch senators too compared Kazakhstan's progress with that of Pakistan. A Baloch senator viewed that Pakistani government was under the misconception that CARs were a golden egg for Pakistan as through them this country would be able to get access to new markets. While to the senator the problem in this regard was that Pakistan's economy was not too stable to get benefit from the reach to that new market. He made a comparison of Pakistan with CARs as the infrastructure in the former was not

developed like in the latter. He looked strangely to the irony of history that despite having admirable cent percent literacy rate and invaluable resources, CARs were in crisis. He praised their fully established infrastructure.⁵ An Opposition Senator criticized that Pakistan government was trying to subjugate Kazakhstan to the American bloc. He asked on whose signals did the government say that it was providing loans at soft interest rates to the three emerging states of Central Asia?⁶

The religious senators were convinced of the view that CARs were a precious addition in Islamic countries after an interval of their subjugation under the USSR. One of such senators, Dr. Muhammad Rehan, called the region all around Afghanistan *Ajam*⁷ (non-Arabs). This region, in the view of Rehan, was reviving. To him this region had served Islam well in past.⁸ The re-advent of the CARs was thus taken as a revival of Islamic hegemony. The religious minded and treasury senators differed with the prevailing perception that narrated that the people of CARs were secular minded people and infirm in Islam, therefore, would not fulfill the expectations of Pakistanis regarding their support and friendship on the ground of common Islamic religiosity. In contrary to these views, the religious minded senators observed that CAR's relations not only with Pakistan but with the entire Islamic world including Turkey and Iran, were not being developed on the basis of any immediate and temporary expediency. Rather, the people of all these countries are engaging with Islamic states because they share deep historical, linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious reasons that provide the natural basis for the establishment of a Muslim bloc. This is the strategic dimension that India and the 'only super power of the planet' now, the USA cannot afford. If Communist Soviet Union, despite being a superpower, could not keep them away from the Muslim world, the United States, despite all its military and economic influence, would not be able to stop the natural rise of a Muslim bloc in Central and South Asia. To achieve this goal, it was suggested that Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) should be strengthened and its secretariat staff and funds should be increased.⁹

Connectivity was desired

Pakistani senators stressed upon the necessity and significance of connectivity soon after the independence of the CARs. One senator noted the quotation of famous historian Arnold J. Toynbee who said that in the history of the world, only those cities and countries developed who paid heed to the construction of roundabouts in their territories. To the senator it meant that the nations who passed the international routes through their regions were ultimately developed economically. As a consequence, economic development would be difficult until Pakistan is changed into a roundabout of the entire region. On this basis, the senator suggested, the government should give priority to the construction of the RCD highway over the construction of motorway and the Indus highway. Apart from the internal roads of the country, as soon as the problem of Afghanistan is solved, the roads of Afghanistan should be made usable again and the roads from Pakistan to Central Asia should be opened.¹⁰ The senators desired that such a great achievement of the re-advent of CARs needed to be brought to end (results). It needed to bear fruit. It was apprehended lest Pakistan is used to serve American interests and abandon the aims of the Islamic world.¹¹ Another Senator said that we have found the opportunity of having relations with CARs. This will give us economic benefits.¹²

Connectivity of CARs was related to Balochistan

Some senators from Balochistan related the boom of economic activity in their province with the connectivity with CARs.¹³ In August 1993 a senator asked in the Senate “where did your enthusiasm go for connectivity with Central Asia. He asked this question in the context of passiveness regarding the construction of Gawadar Port. To him Balochistan was only province that was connected with Central Asia. Therefore, attention to development of Balochistan was required.¹⁴

Correlation of CARs’ Connectivity with Afghanistan Conflict

Almost Senators belonging to all parliamentary groups recorded their concerns about the continued conflict in Afghanistan that was an obstacle in the way of connectivity with CARs. Qazi Hussain Ahmad from Jamaat-i-Islami expressed his grief on the fact that Afghan warriors were fighting with each other after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.¹⁵ Hasan A. Sheikh viewed that CARs would be of no use to Pakistan as they could not be reach because Afghanistan would be inaccessible due to continuing civil war there. He then suggested the direction of Pakistan's foreign policy should be towards making some sort of compromises or settlements in respect of Afghanistan problem.¹⁶ Syed Ehsan Shah, a senator from Baluchistan, repeated the same point of view on August 29 exclaiming that Pakistanis were happy on re-appearance of Muslim states in Central Asia. It was considered that now Pakistan will be able to have trade with them and Pakistani economy would improve. But the continuing trouble in Afghanistan marred those expectations.¹⁷

The senators of Pakistan observed that the peace in Afghanistan was necessary to access the benefits of emergence of CARs.¹⁸ It was necessary because until there was peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan could not trade with these new republics.¹⁹ Senators said that if Pakistanis wanted the trade with these states they could not do so in the air. They needed road and railway line. These would pass through Afghanistan. Thus it was the time that Pakistan needed peace in Afghanistan more than everything as if civil war continued there and if Afghans did not let Pakistan pass through Afghanistan, Pakistan would never be able to do trade with these newly emerged states.²⁰

In context of connectivity with CARs the views of treasury and opposition benches about Afghanistan policy remained opposite to each other. A senator of ruling Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) Khwaja Muhammad Asif expressed his opinion that if Pakistan's routes were opened to the states of Central Asia, Afghanistan could bring an economic revolution for itself and for Pakistan as well. He said that keeping all these interests and comments in mind, the Nawaz Sharif Government (1990-1993) was trying to negotiate peace in Afghanistan.²¹

Senator Fasih Iqbal of PML praised the Afghanistan policy of government calling it 'very stable.' To him Jihad was no longer a form and also there was no more communism. All the controlling groups in Afghanistan were Muslims. However, he expressed his desire that all groups must negotiate and the Nawaz government's policy should be implemented immediately so that the problem of Afghanistan could be resolved and the connection to the CARs could be made easy. He viewed Afghan Issue an obstacle in establishing connectivity with CARs and suggested the government to take immediate action.²²

The opposition senators saw contradiction in the Nawaz government's cordial treatment with leaders of CARs and abhorring conduct with Afghanistan President Najibullah while both were former communists. A senator said that CARs were socialist but we welcomed them by calling Muslims. On the other side considering Afghans as infidels, we did jihad against them.²³ Another senator from Balochistan also pointed out the controversy that Pakistan supported fight against Najeebullah for six years but shook hands with Kazak President who had been in Communist Party since long.²⁴ Opposition also observed that on the one hand, the government was improving relations with former communist states included in Soviet Union and the reason was being given that those were Muslim states. On the other hand, the Muslim government of Najibullah was not being recognized in Afghanistan and the *Mujahideen* supported by Pakistan were fighting against his government and were not ready to negotiate with it.²⁵

To the opposition senators, CARs were established on the basis of nationalism rather than Islam. These senators were of the view that Afghanistan was the only trade route, communication route with CARs. Until a nationalist government was established in Afghanistan, strong and stable relations with these independent states of Central Asia could never be established.²⁶ Another type of contradiction was highlighted by opposition between the policies of government about South Asia and CARs. A Baloch senator, for example, said that Pakistan was located at such a crossroads that the past of its people was also connected with

South Asia and they were also linked in relations with Southwest Asia. It was impossible that Pakistan might enhance its relations with CARs but its relations remained tense in South Asia.²⁷

The Focus Dimmed with the Failure in Solution of Afghan Conflict

The focus on the connectivity related to the CARs dimmed in the statements of government both in and out of parliament. This was indicated on December 22, 1992 by a senator Mir Abdul Jabbar who asked the question that during the days of liberation of CARs our rulers issued statements that Pakistan would install railway line there. It was stated that Pakistan would establish cultural and trade relations with these republics and establish a strong communication system. Pointing to the abundance of such claims of connectivity, the senator questioned whether the government still thought so after a year. In reply, the Railway Minister told that government did not claim to lay the railway line. The minister clarified that the senator had only asked about Kazakhstan while Pakistan shared no border with Kazakhstan.

“First is Afghanistan. Next is Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan will be followed by Uzbekistan. Therefore, a railway line will have to be built to Afghanistan first. Unless everyone is interested and everyone meets, the big expenses cannot be met. It has not been decided yet.”²⁸

The said minister denied any statement or proposal of the government about starting railway track from Kazakhstan. The minister said that this problem was economic rather than political. He confirmed that proposal of railway track with Iran and Afghanistan rather than Kazakhstan was discussed.²⁹

There was less mention of CARs in the debate on 1993's presidential address. However, Syed Abbas Shah stressed for peace in Afghanistan for the sake of getting proper benefits from the bloc of Muslims formed after the liberation of CARs.³⁰ In the discussion on foreign policy held on 25 August 1992 there was no mention of CARs even in the context of Afghanistan issue

that was discussed by every speaker in detail. On the next day of debate Yahya Bakhtiar mentioned the CARs in the context of Afghanistan that there were risks and stakes, not only for Pakistan but for the entire region, including the CARs, whose future was at stake. To the Senator, the peace in Afghanistan depended totally on forthcoming negotiations which Pakistan was going to conduct.³¹

Despite the decision of 3rd Summit of ECO at Islamabad held on 14-15 March 1995 to observe 1995-2004 as decade of transport and communication (Connectivity) most of the senators ignored the concept of connectivity with CARs in their speeches. Some of them complained that the government disregarded the connectivity with these republics. Some comments in the Senate about the summit appeared on 21st March 1995 when a Senator recalled the prospects of connectivity emerged with the emergence of CARs and were enthusiastically pronounced by the government of Pakistan. Another senator claimed that trade that was supposed to go through Pakistan would now go through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The senator regretted that there were no prospects of complacency for Pakistan regarding connectivity with CARs. The senator said that Pakistani leaders had been conveying good news to the nation for four years that Pakistan's bad days would be over as soon as the trade with Central Asia started. While in practical this supposed trade would be transited through Iran in preference to Pakistan.³²

Conclusion

Senate of Pakistan joined the ongoing debate in the country on the prospects of prosperity emerged with the advent of the CARs. Most of the senators claimed that Pakistan contributed for the liberation of CARs through playing active part in Afghanistan conflict. With mixed reactions to the government's policies in the case of CARs, senators expressed hope that the creation of these states opened up new prospects of development for Pakistan. Most of the senators looked impressed with the economic development in CARs. The religious minded senators were too optimistic that they saw revival of Islam in the whole scenario. The desire for establishment of connectivity was expressed by

everyone. It was viewed that the connectivity with the CARs will decrease the poverty and economic issues especially in Balochistan. In general, all the senators identified peace in Afghanistan as the most important requirement in terms of developing and benefiting from relations with Central Asian states. According to them, it was impossible to establish land connectivity with Central Asian states without establishing peace in Afghanistan. However, in Senate as well as in entire country, the focus on CARs dimmed with the failure in solution of Afghan conflict and without any major practical step. In these times Senate as an institution did not give any input for the solution of Afghanistan issue or for establishment of relations with CARs. Apart from the occasional mention by various senators, there is no visible action in the Senate regarding relations with Central Asian countries at the institutional level. We do not see any committee work, resolutions, questions and even statements of the senators on this issue.

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