

1/1/2024
Pakistan is eager to establish a
minilateral forum in South Asia.

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The concept of minilateralism is relatively new in the international policies. In evolving political dynamics, countries prefer to join or establish forums which are issue-based instead of joining hardcore military alliances. Best examples of the minilateral forums are Quad and I2U2. Quad is the alliance in Indo-Pacific which is focused on strategic and security issues. Similarly, I2U2 is the alliance of middle east which deals with economic and developmental problems. Following the trend, a new development

in South Asia could be seen as the establishment of South Asian Quad. In May and June, trilateral talks held between Pakistan, China and Afghanistan which culminated in the improved relations of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similarly in June, Pakistan established stronger cooperation with Bangladesh by the help of China. Pakistan seems to have learned this lesson and is following a similar path to secure its interests in the South Asian region by establishing a 'South Asian Quad' - A forum immune to Indian interventions.

There are several reasons that have pushed Pakistan to act this way and adopt multilateralism. Those reasons are discussed in the following paragraphs.

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The narrative of Pakistan about SAARC was very optimistic ~~but~~ it gradually turned to be pessimistic because of India's till 2014. In 2016, SAARC's summit was scheduled in Islamabad but was postponed due to political tensions. It was mainly postponed because of by the refusal of India to attend the summit. India alleged Pakistan for Uri attack in 2015 without any evidence. Pakistan has tried to solve this issue on many forums diplomatically. But these efforts could not convince India to change its stance. Apart from this, India has always tried to become hegemon in SAARC because of its substantial economic and political strength. Considering all this, Pakistan is seeking new ways to enhance its diplomatic outreach.

Secondly, minilateral forums deliver quick results. They are established for specific issues and they remain focused on that specific problem. The best example in this regard is trilateral talks of Pakistan, China and Afghanistan. It has achieved the desired results in the recent past. China has agreed to build Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan railway project. This achievement has pushed Pakistan towards Bangladesh for the regional cooperation.

Thirdly, Pakistan considers China a stabilising factor in South Asia. In the past, Pakistan had proposed China as dialogue partner of Saarc, but India rejected this idea. So, Pakistan is free to bring China into the equation in absence of India. China's role in South Asia has been

significantly enhanced over the past decade. Except for Bhutan and India all South Asian countries are signatories to the Belt and Road initiative and China has pledged over \$100 billion in these countries. So, Pakistan considers China an opportunity to counter Indian influence in South Asia.

These were some reasons of why Pakistan is considering multilateralism as an important pillar of its foreign policy in South Asia. There will be some challenges faced by Pakistan in implementing this new policy which are discussed below.

First of all, The major challenge Pakistan would face will be the reaction of New Delhi's reaction. Although, New Delhi is concerned

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about this development in its neighbourhood. For New Delhi, it would be unacceptable because this forum will be equivalent to its strategic encirclement. China's growing influence in South Asia is a major concern for India as it always viewed South Asia's states as its primary sphere of influence. So, this China-Pak collaboration would not be ignored by India.

Another challenge will be the sustainability for this new mini-lateral forum. ^{plz write in formal expression} It is a big decision to engage South Asian states in a forum or by creating 'South Asian Quad' excluding India, there will be set backs to the forum as India is not a small state. Secondly, In Bangladesh's case, the interim government seems

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eager to be a part of such forum, but will the next elected government there continue to cooperate? It is a big challenge yet to be solved by Pakistan. However, for now, Pakistan is ~~see~~ seizing this strategic opportunity.

Summing up the whole argument, Pakistan seems to be following the path of developed nations to secure its interests. Creating such minilateral forums will provide Pakistan desired and quick results. Also, geopolitical environment is conducive for such a forum and Pakistan is seizing this strategic moment. On the other side, Pakistan has to tackle the challenges which are also severe and cannot be ignored. New Delhi's response should be anticipated and Pakistan should use proactive approach to make the best out of it.