

UNITED STATES-
PAKISTAN RELATIONS:
NEW OPPORTUNITIES
AND OLD CHALLENGES

TOUQIR HUSSAIN

South Asia Scan

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Touqir Hussain

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Institute of South Asian Studies

National University of Singapore

29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace

#08-06 (Block B) Singapore 119620

Tel (65) 6516 4239

Fax (65) 6776 7505

URL www.isas.nus.edu.sg

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Executive Summary

United States (US)-Pakistan relations are arguably one of the most talked about but also one of the least understood. The fundamental problem in the relations has been that the interests of the two countries have largely differed. And even on shared interests, their policies, perceptions and politics have often differed. In each of their three alliances so far, they have been allies on one issue and antagonists on another. They were dealing with strategic issues but lacked a strategic convergence and framework. As a consequence, while some of their vital interests were served, some others were harmed. They lost as much as they gained from the relationship.

This special report gives a brief historical background to illustrate these contradictions. It then dwells on contemporary issues in the relationship arising from the post-9/11 security challenges that have impacted South Asia, of which the central issue has been the Afghanistan war. This report gives an exposé of how this relationship got entangled with a failing war. It was also the period in which the US entered into an extraordinary relationship with India that came to have a negative impact on Pakistan and US-Pakistan relations.

US President Donald Trump's desire to exit from the Afghanistan war has recently led to an improved perception of Pakistan, whose role in helping the US, in Trump's words, to "extricate itself from Afghanistan", is crucial. This report analyses in detail the causes of the failure of the Afghanistan war, highlights Pakistan's role in facilitating the US-Taliban peace talks, and also looks at the US-Pakistan relationship in regard to issues other than Afghanistan.

The US may walk away from the Afghanistan war like before, but it cannot walk away from the region, unlike in the past. It is heavily invested in the region now. And what Pakistan does affects its interests directly or indirectly, and not just in regard to the Afghanistan war. The US is concerned about security issues like extremism, terrorism and nuclear weapons, and about the impact of India-Pakistan relations on Washington's interests in India and of China-Pakistan relations on the US strategy towards China.

Looking into the future, the report advances several arguments in favour of the continued importance of US-Pakistan relations. Pakistan will remain relevant for Washington because of its location at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Russia, China, India and Iran. It is not just America; China, too, is pivoting to Asia and to the Middle East, and Pakistan is where the two pivots face off. And from Washington's perspective, Pakistan should not be left entirely dependent on China. Otherwise the possibility emerges of a China-Pakistan-Iran axis.

As for Pakistan's perspective, it will be in the eye of a developing storm as it faces, on the one side, prospects of the failure of Afghanistan, and, on the other, continued pressures from an assertive and dominant India while it continues to cope with its internal challenges – specially the struggle against terrorism and extremism, and efforts at the stabilisation of its economy and the strengthening of democracy. A successful navigation of these challenges by Pakistan will require good relations with all big powers.

The report concludes with recommendations for both Pakistan and the US. Whether for survival or progress, Pakistan's foreign policy will have to find a balance between addressing its external security challenges and meeting its development needs at home, especially by focusing on the improvement of relations with its neighbours. It must take stronger action against Jihadist organisations within its borders. As for the US, if it can handle the complexities of its relationship with Pakistan successfully by finding a modus vivendi with China and developing a South Asia policy that balances its geo-political strategy, regional interests and bilateral relations, there could be opportunities for both the US and Pakistan for an enhanced relationship.

Introduction

South Asia has changed and so has the way Washington relates to it. The changes, brought on by the end of the Cold war, globalisation, the region's nuclearisation, 9/11 and Washington's response to it, present new opportunities and challenges for the US. In a broader sense, India is where the US sees opportunities, and Pakistan, along with Afghanistan, is where it sees challenges.

However, in foreign affairs, issues are never so clear cut. There are often overlaps and paradoxes. Since 9/11, Pakistan has been a vital partner of the US in the so-called "war on terrorism"; yet also a target in this war – part of the solution but also part of the problem, and finally an ally but not a friend. Bruce Riedel calls the relationship with Pakistan a "deadly embrace" in a book of the same title.¹ Pakistan, he says, is at the crossroads of many of America's nightmares. He may not know that many Pakistanis may have long come to the same conclusion about America. Such is the complexity of the relationship. There are complaints and grievances on both sides, though each sees its own pain while obscuring that of the other.

The relations have over the past six decades served some important interests of the two countries during three periods of their close alliance – first in the early years of the Cold War, the second in the dying days of the Cold War during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviets and now the third and the current one since 9/11. However, both countries have faced a dilemma in dealing with each other. In the early years of the alliance,² Pakistan was struggling for survival and needed the US more than Washington needed it, and convinced itself that, given its geo-political location, it had a fixed and unchanging importance for Washington. Pakistan wanted a strategic relationship with the US. Washington, on the other hand, never really saw clear, long-term strategic interests in Pakistan but found its services valuable in meeting specific and sporadic geo-political and security challenges.

The US did not share Pakistan's expectations of the relationship and did not want to give it a long-term commitment, especially against India.³ However, through hyperbole, which is a hallmark of the US' public policy, and agreements that gave vaguely defined commitments, Washington kept

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1. Bruce Riedel, 'Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America and the Future of the Global Jihad', (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, 2011).
 2. S M Burke and Lawrence Ziring, 'Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis', (Oxford University Press; 2nd edition, 1991).
 3. Dennis Kux, 'The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2001: Disenchanted Allies', (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2001).

Pakistan under the illusion of a strategic alliance, as it did not want to lose its support. In time, Pakistan discovered the reality. Pakistan too misrepresented its policies to satisfy Washington as it did not want to lose American support.

There were other contradictions too in the relationship. In Pakistan, successive governments came to make the relationship with the US a part of the organising idea of Pakistan, giving Washington a feeling that the country, especially its leadership, cannot survive without American help. And in times of dire need, Washington over-indulged Pakistan which left a lingering feeling among the ruling elite that the US cannot walk away from Pakistan.

Both feelings were a legacy of the times when military governments were in power in Pakistan and in Washington, given the nature of a relationship that focused largely, if not exclusively, on military and intelligence cooperation. The White House was driving the relationship, aided by the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The people on both sides were not entirely on the same page with their governments, one reason being that they were not fully aware of what was going on. There was a relationship and there was an underworld of that relationship.

Each government ended sexing up the US-Pakistan relations at its end to get domestic political support and make promises it could not deliver. So when the special need that had brought them close was unfulfilled, and the relationship returned to normal, each found the other falling short of its inflated image as an ally. The result was mistrust and misperceptions in the relationship that have become a recurring feature of that relationship.

However, the fact is the trust deficit was not really the problem but a symptom masking a complex set of issues that impinged on some of the fundamentals of the two countries' national interests and foreign policies, not to mention systemic issues and domestic dynamics on each side.

A Brief History

History is important to the understanding of this complicated relationship, and this is what it tells us.⁴ From the late 1950s until the mid-1960s, during their first alliance, the two countries were allies in advancing Washington's containment policy against Moscow. Pakistan received substantial economic and security assistance that helped stabilise the fledgling country as it struggled for survival. However, the US relationship with India suffered, and Pakistan's democratic process was marred by its army, which was strengthened by the US.⁵ With the onset of the Cold War, especially as the Eisenhower administration came into power, the US had been so desperate to have allies in the containment of the Soviet Union that it picked up allies as much for the sake of numbers as for any strategic reasons. Once the need was gone, especially with a relative relaxation of the East-West tensions in the 1960s, some of the allies who were not critically needed and whose strategic value at best remained secondary and nebulous, were dropped as fast as they were picked up. Pakistan was one such ally - an ally without an alliance, a real alliance.

Yes, the two countries were bound by the 1959 US-Pakistan Bilateral Security Cooperation Agreement, but they never agreed on what the agreement meant. Pakistan's geo-political importance was variable, as were the US' global and strategic interests. That made it possible for the US to walk out of the relationship when its interests were no longer at stake. The fact is that the US had gone ahead with its alliance with Pakistan because it needed an ally even if Islamabad could not or did not want to do everything Washington wanted. And Pakistan needed a benefactor and patron even if it would not do everything that the US wanted. That is where misperceptions and false expectations in the relationship originated, as the public on both sides had not been told the whole truth. The relationship came to an abrupt end in 1965 with Washington having cut off military aid to Pakistan and India following the 1965 war.

While the US has often treated Pakistan unfairly, even in a highhanded manner, it must be said that the public grudge against America for not supporting Pakistan against India in 1965 and 1971 is misplaced. A close scrutiny of US treaty obligations to Pakistan leaves no doubt that the historical

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4. Shirin Tahir-Kheli, 'The United States and Pakistan: The Evolution of an Influence Relationship', (Praeger Publishers, 1982).
 5. Touqir Hussain, 'US-Pakistan relationship: What Trust Deficit?', Policy Brief No 31, *Middle East Institute*, November 2010. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-pakistan-relations-what-trust-deficit>.

US commitments were essentially in the context of a communist threat to Pakistan's security.

The 1959 agreement on bilateral cooperation clearly says that, in case of aggression against Pakistan, the US government, in accordance with the constitution of the US, will take such appropriate action, including the use of armed forces as may be mutually agreed upon, and is envisaged in the joint resolution to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. The joint resolution on the Middle East speaks of only one eventuality of the US coming to the aid of a country under aggression, and that is in the event of communist aggression.

The next US-Pakistan engagement was in the 1980s. The intervening period was interspersed with episodes of benign neglect, sanctions and isolation of Pakistan by the US and the gradual rise of anti-Americanism in Pakistan.⁶ Then, in 1979, the US hostages' crisis in Tehran and the burning of the US embassy in Islamabad signalled the merger of Pakistani and Iranian anti-Americanism that began feeding a broader sentiment against the US in the Islamic world. The year 1979 ended with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The US and Pakistan came together in the 1980s because of these realities. However, this liaison turned out to be dangerous. They cooperated, but amid undercurrents of anti-Americanism in Pakistan. However, there were also other anomalies in the relationship. Pakistan helped the US defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan, hastening the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, under the umbrella of this cooperation, it went on to complete its nuclear programme, in breach of US non-proliferation objectives.

The US-led Afghan Jihad against the Soviets, assisted by Pakistan, ended up as a bitter sweet victory, as it laid the foundation of a deadly extremist religious infrastructure that started beating to the rhythm of global Islamic revivalism, unleashing the forces of radicalism. These forces had a horrendous impact on the region and on the US and global security, the most tragic and visible sign of which was 9/11.

The Afghan war did help the US' national interests in that it contributed to Washington's victory in the Cold War. However, Pakistan's own gain was limited largely to the army and Zia Ul-Haq, which turned out to be a mixed blessing.⁷ On balance, both countries lost as much as they gained.

6. Dennis Kux, op cit.

7. Hussain Haqqani, 'Magnificent Delusions: Pakistan, the United States, and an Epic History of Misunderstanding', (Public Affairs, 2013).

With the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, and the US on the verge of winning the Cold War, Washington thought the US did not need Pakistan or to even worry about Afghanistan any more. It yet again packed up and left, but this time added insult to injury by cutting off aid to Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment.⁸ Ironically, this amendment was originally crafted by the US Congress to help the continuation of the aid relationship with Islamabad by shifting the red line that would trigger US sanctions on account of Pakistan's nuclear programme. Pakistanis knew about the negative side of the amendment in that, if it crossed the red line, it would be sanctioned, but never took it seriously.

The Americans departed following their victory over the Soviets but left behind a broken Afghanistan, an assertive Jihad looking for new causes and an embittered Pakistan abandoned and sanctioned. There was an exponential rise in anti-Americanism even among the close allies of Washington, like the army.

Left to live by its own wits, Pakistan made some poor policy choices. It became a foster home to the children of the Afghan Jihad. The Taliban rose as the grandchildren of Jihad. In the process, both Afghanistan and Pakistan played havoc with each other, in the end becoming tributaries and confluences of extremist influences.

8. "The Pressler Amendment and Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program (Senate – July 31, 1992)." The Pressler Amendment and Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program (Senate – July 31, 1992). 31 July 1992. <http://fas.org/news/pakistan/1992/920731.htm>

9/11 and the United States' Re-engagement with Pakistan

After a decade of threats against Pakistan for its alleged support of militant organisations, Washington returned to Pakistan in 2001 following the 9/11 attack. Washington, however, did not realise that, this time around, it was a different Pakistan with whom an unpopular America re-engaged on behalf of a controversial war on terrorism, and an avoidable, if not unnecessary, Afghanistan war. So while Pakistan became once again a US ally, trust had long deserted the relationship.

Although the Pervez Musharaf government in Pakistan then was cooperative, it was unhappy that in the war on terrorism it was being asked to use force against its own people – Muslims – at America's behest, and allow Washington to penetrate Pakistan with CIA operatives. Pakistan was also having to cooperate in creating an Afghanistan that was not consistent with its strategic interests. Not to mention that the population was also unhappy since America was, once again, supporting an unrepresentative and unpopular regime in Pakistan. The unpopularity of the regime and of America, thus, came to be mutually reinforcing. The regime got caught between Washington's pressure to do more for the US and the people's demand to do less. And it ended up with ineffectual policies that would please neither side.

It is never easy to handle a war-related relationship, especially a war that has not been going well.⁹ Pakistan had provided valuable cooperation in the war on terrorism. Most of the high value Al-Qaeda operatives were either killed or captured with the help of Pakistan's intelligence agencies. However, the problem was the Afghanistan war. Pakistan gave critical logistics support to the war effort in Afghanistan, but that war started failing not long after it started.

The Afghanistan War: What went wrong?

What went wrong in the Afghanistan war?¹⁰ Many things! Not only did the US military campaign in Afghanistan lack a political strategy, but also in the rush to war there was little effort to comprehend the nature of the threat or the enemy. Along with the lack of a strategic imperative, incoherent war aims, insufficient resources and poor execution, the war effort was also undermined by a shift in attention and resources to another war of doubtful necessity.

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9. Touqir Hussain, 'US Pakistan Engagement: The War on Terrorism and Beyond', *United States Peace Institute*, 2005. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/07/us-pakistan-engagement-war-terrorism-and-beyond>
 10. Touqir Hussain, '*Pakistan: A New Beginning*', in '*America's Challenge in the Greater Middle East*', ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

The real enemy in Afghanistan was Al-Qaeda. It was a strategic mistake to try to defeat Al-Qaeda through defeating the Taliban. Not that the Taliban should have been tolerated and not dealt with, but that was a separate challenge which should not have been handled in the context of Al-Qaeda and certainly not in preference to defeating them. The US strategy mixed up three different challenges in Afghanistan – the stabilisation of Afghanistan, defeating the Taliban and fighting Al-Qaeda – and bundled them into a single challenge to be handled with a single war. It became a zero sum strategy.

On top of that, it was wrong for the US to start the Afghanistan war as a punitive measure and as an intervention in the ongoing civil war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. The US did not defeat the Taliban; it just pushed them into Pakistan where they could not be touched. This way, the war could have been fought successfully only by taking it to Pakistan, which was not an option.

The context of dealing with the Taliban was Afghanistan, where the main challenge was the reconstruction and stabilisation of a country with a new ethno-regional balance acceptable to all the Afghans and to all the regional players, so that they did not feel threatened and did not interfere. In sum, the objective should have been to put together a fractured Afghanistan. That was the central challenge. The Taliban solution had to be found in this context. As for Al-Qaeda, it was a separate challenge to be handled as part of the campaign against terrorism, and should have had a higher priority.

Another mistake the US made was to think that, like in Iraq where it mistakenly thought Saddam Hussain was the only problem, it came to see the Taliban as the only issue in Afghanistan, and underestimated its gravity. Washington thought that all it had to do was remove the Taliban. And by thinking it had “defeated” them in the first flush of the war, it had solved Afghanistan’s problems and could move on to another war. This reflected not only a poor understanding of the historical complexities of Afghanistan, but also of what had been going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the previous two decades.

In the previous two decades prior to 9/11, the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s had brought in a visible rise in extremist influences in the region, particularly in the tribal belt along the Afghan-Pakistan border. War planners should have anticipated that the Taliban would run away to Pakistan’s tribal areas from where they had arisen in the 1990s and where their resistance against the US in time would come to have strong support, which Pakistan (now vulnerable to extremist influences) would neither have the capacity nor the political will to challenge.

As the spill-over of the post 9/11 Afghanistan war merged with these extremist influences and cross currents of local and international Jihad, the whole area along the Afghan-Pakistan border virtually became one country and a no-go area, having come under the influence of the Taliban.

As the war kept failing, Washington started blaming it on the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. The US forced Pakistan to take action, which it did, and ended up provoking a serious backlash by way of the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban in 2007 who wreaked havoc in Pakistan with attacks on the army and civil institutions and even President Musharaf. They took over Swat, which had to be cleared by the army in a massive operation in 2009.¹¹

The reality is the war did not start failing because of the Taliban's resurgence; rather, the Taliban were resurgent because of the war's failure. Apart from a bad war strategy, Washington had bad partners in Afghanistan. The Taliban thrived on grievances and instability caused by poor governance and corruption. The mainly rural population was sympathetic to them not so much for ideological reasons but as an alternative to bad governance, and for security and protection against the corrupt and oppressive police and strongmen. There was no real Afghan effort to defeat the Taliban. Afghanistan's experience with democracy was too weak to resolve its fundamental challenges.

Pakistan and the Taliban: A Hedging Strategy

Sensing that the war was failing and fearing yet another American departure – and a replay of 1990, when the US walked away from the region – Pakistan started banking on the Taliban as a hedge if Afghanistan descended into chaos again. There were other issues as well. The extraordinary new relationship between the US and India, and Washington's nuclear deal with India and refusal to give Pakistan the same treatment, had caused disappointment and concern among Pakistanis. So had the statements in the US expressing concern about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons in the face of a threat from the radicals.

The perceived preferential treatment given to India had fostered perceptions in Pakistan – right or wrong – that the US and India were collaborating to destabilise Pakistan and get at its nuclear programme. And also with the increasing presence and influence of India in Afghanistan and the growing relations between the two countries, the Pakistani army saw the Indian threat

11. Embassy of Pakistan, Washington DC, 'A factsheet on Pakistan's CT effort', <http://embassyofpakistanusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Factsheet-on-Pakistan%E2%80%99s-CT-Effort.pdf>.

relocating to Afghanistan. In Pakistan's security concerns, Afghanistan and India had merged, raising fears of encirclement.

In Islamabad's perceptions, an Afghanistan was being created that was not consistent with Pakistan's security and strategic interests. Besides, the war's blowback had brought enormous harm to Pakistan's security, economy and stability. Pakistan felt hurt by the death of nearly 7,000 of its security personnel at the hands of terrorists, in retaliation for the Pakistani army's support for what they saw as America's war in Afghanistan.¹²

The war had lost whatever little support it may have had in Pakistan. Anti-Americanism rose, incited in part by the drone attacks and in part by terrorist attacks by Pakistan's own Taliban, blamed on the spillover of the Afghanistan war.¹³ The deadliest was an attack on a school in December 2014 in which more than 100 kids were slaughtered by the terrorists.

With the Afghans' own failure, Washington's poor war strategy and rapid changes of US command, and with the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan and the support given to them by Iran and Russia, the war started going the Taliban's way. And with US President Barack Obama's announcement during his second term of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and change in the combat role of US forces, the Taliban attacks, especially by the Haqqani network suspected to be based in Pakistan, escalated, for which Islamabad was blamed by American politicians and media alike. As the war began faltering beyond repair, the US army found a good scapegoat in Pakistan. The Pentagon, which used to be a reliable ally of Pakistan, also turned against it.

When Trump came into power, the US-Pakistan relationship was already troubled. He was persuaded by his national security establishment to give one last try to the military solution by intensifying military operations against the Taliban and by putting pressure on Pakistan. It did not work. By mid-2018, the curtain had come down on the military option and Washington was looking for talks with the Taliban. This also coincided with Imran Khan's accession to power in Pakistan. Khan had decided to change the policy towards Afghanistan and to seek a new relationship with the US. Zalmay Khalilzad, the newly-appointed US Special Representative to Afghanistan, began dangling the prize of revived US-Pakistan relations to Khan. However, he also doubled up the pressure on Pakistan.

12. Ibid.

13. Peter Bergen and Daniel Rothenberg, 'Drone Wars: Transforming Conflict, Law, and Policy' (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 2015).

Pakistan Falls in Line

Pakistan was expected to put pressure on the Taliban and it obliged. However, Pakistan's influence with the Taliban only worked to the extent of bringing them to the negotiating table in Doha. Pakistan clearly needed to do more. That was the background to a letter written in December 2018 by Trump seeking Khan's help. The US, nonetheless, kept up the previously ongoing pressure on Pakistan and, in fact, raised the ante by opposing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), criticising Pakistan's relations with China and condemning the presence and continued operation of Pakistani Jihadist organisations. It tried to put obstacles in the way of Pakistan's request for economic assistance from the International Monetary Fund.

The US also doubled up pressure on Pakistan through the international financial watchdog, the Financial Action Task Force. Pakistan was placed on its "grey list" for shortcomings in dealing with money laundering and terrorism financing. The threat of being blacklisted loomed with a deadline to reform by October 2019. Security assistance was suspended, including what the US owed Pakistan under the Coalition Support Fund, which came to approximately US\$2 billion (\$2.72 billion).

Given Pakistan's difficult economic situation, it had no option but to change its tack. American economic power and military might could not be ignored; Pakistan could benefit from its friendship with Washington or lose by alienating it. Pakistan realised that its relationship with China, however vital, was not the answer to all its problems, and that a sole reliance on it could lead to a relationship of dependency. The US still wielded considerable influence in international financial institutions, and this mattered for Pakistan, which was often looking for external financing. Besides, Washington may still use its influence with India for crisis management in the region from time to time.

All three sides – the US, Pakistan and the Taliban – started shifting from their previous positions. Pakistan brought pressure on the Taliban to be flexible in the talks with the US. Islamabad also realised that its so-called refrain that the peace process had to be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned would be meaningless if Pakistan did not recognise the legitimacy and centrality of the Kabul government. Mere pious expressions of good intentions would not be enough; Pakistan would have to show its sincerity with actions. Accordingly, it invited the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to visit Pakistan in June 2019, and a good understanding was established between him and Khan. The Pakistani Chief of Army, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, also visited Kabul. Islamabad began responding to another demand of Washington of acting against militant organisations.

As Pakistan responded positively by helping the US-Taliban talks along, the US reciprocated, especially as clarity emerged in Washington about exiting from Afghanistan. So the way was paved for Trump's invitation to Khan to visit the US.

United States-Pakistan Relations: Will They be Reset?

Khan went to Washington from 21 to 23 July 2019 hoping for a reset in the relations and that Pakistan would again become an ally, but it seemed the US administration was not in a hurry. It had other ideas. The invitation to the White House and the words of praise for Khan in the Oval Office were more of a reward for Pakistan's help in the US-Taliban talks so far than an indication of the future of the relationship.

Washington seemed to have worked out a new strategy towards Pakistan. It saw two important interests in Pakistan to focus on in the immediate future – Afghanistan and counter terrorism, which included action against Jihadists – and had developed some useful economic leverages that had been tested and found working. The strategy was to start with the pressure, double down if Pakistan did not oblige and take off the pressure if it did. For now, the pressure has been taken off, but if Pakistan does not oblige, the pressure may return. The relations had been reset by Washington but to its own preferences, at least for the near-term.

In a pre-visit briefing, an administration official had said, “We will consider changing that suspension on certain items if Pakistan meets our security concerns both in Afghanistan, and with regard to some of the externally-focused groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.”¹⁴ The official reiterated that to avail the opportunity for restoring a close relationship with Washington, Islamabad will have to “change its policies” towards terrorism and militancy.

Apparently, the talks were business like both at the White House and the Pentagon. Certain demands may have been made, especially about the Taliban. Reportedly, Pakistan's offers of help were found satisfactory. However, no *quid pro quo* was offered to Pakistan. The US made no promises other than possibly offering inducements that if Pakistan obliged, there could be prospects of a vaguely defined “reinvigorated relationship” in the future that might include enhanced economic and trade ties and the release of suspended aid. As the visit ended, the security assistance was still suspended.

Trump did promise to mediate in the Kashmir dispute, but the offer was immediately watered down by the administration officials who clarified that the mediation offer was valid only if both India and Pakistan asked for it, thus

14. ‘US to press Imran Khan to take irreversible action against terrorists & facilitate Taliban talks’, *Economic Times*, 20 July 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-to-press-imran-to-take-irreversible-action-against-terrorists-facilitate-taliban-talks/articleshow/70302099.cms?from=mdr>.

effectively scuttling the offer as India said it was not going to make any such request. Later, the officials put an interesting twist to the President's offer.¹⁵ They backed Trump's offer but said "a follow-up would depend on the steps that Pakistan now takes to eradicate terrorism from the region".

For Washington, the old challenge of handling the relationship continues – how to deal with the fact that the US and Pakistan are allies on one issue and adversaries on another. In the past, Washington resolved that dilemma by focusing on the core issue on which there was agreement and side stepping the point of difference. It got cooperation from Pakistan, then walked away and went on to punish Pakistan on the issue on which there were differences. Now the US cannot walk away.

The US may walk away from the Afghanistan war like before, but it cannot walk away from the region like in the past, given its interests in the region and geo-politics. It is heavily invested in it now. And what Pakistan does affects its interests, directly and indirectly, and favourably and unfavourably. So how does it handle this convergence and divergence at the same time? That is the dilemma for the US.

Washington has interests in Pakistan not only because of security issues like extremism and terrorism, nuclear weapons and the Afghanistan war, but also because of the impact of Pakistan-India relations and China-Pakistan relations on the US regional and geo-political strategy in South Asia. Such interlocking issues make public policy on Pakistan difficult, especially as Pakistan's public image and political support had diminished in Washington in recent years. Khan's visit has revived it somewhat but it is too early to tell if this change will be enduring. We may see a revival, but not a resurgence of relations, at least for now.

The immediate future of bilateral relations between the US and Pakistan and resumption of security assistance hinge largely on Pakistan's help in regard to Afghanistan.

15. Anwar Iqbal, 'Desire to improve Pak India ties behind Trump's offer: US', *Dawn*, 2 August 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1497591/desire-to-improve-pak-india-ties-behind-trumps-offer-us>

The Deal that Never Was

A US-Taliban deal had been very nearly agreed upon and was about to be announced, but Trump abandoned it at the last minute.¹⁶ It reflected a Taliban dictated deal and fell short of Trump's political needs for re-election as well as America's security and strategic interests.¹⁷ It was not about peace in Afghanistan but the end of America's war there with the drawdown of its troops.

Internal policy differences are being blamed for Trump's decision, but that only tells half the story. Yes, there were differences, but Trump always overrides them. In this case, he was persuaded by those close to him that he was going to make a bad decision – politically and strategically – to go ahead with a flawed deal which was unpopular with the foreign policy establishment in Washington. And what is worse, he was going to sign the deal at Camp David with the very people who are seen by many Americans as responsible for 9/11, and that too on the eve of the 9/11 anniversary, especially when an American soldier had just been killed in a Taliban attack. And on top of that, before the Presidential election in Afghanistan that would have weakened Kabul's legitimacy and negotiating hand.¹⁸ Nine former US officials with experience in Afghanistan, including five former ambassadors to Afghanistan, in a post on the Atlantic Council website, had strongly advised against signing the deal. Among other arguments, they said, "Whether or not the United States wants or is willing to keep some forces engaged, we should not undercut the legitimate government in Afghanistan by keeping them out of negotiations," they wrote. Senator Lindsey Graham, a Trump ally, was also against it.

According to¹⁹ Ryan Crocker, former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, "...my position is that these talks never should have been started on the basis that they were the United States negotiating the future of Afghanistan with the

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16. Mujib Mashal, David Zucchino, and Fatima Faizi, 'In Trump's Taliban Snub, a Shift of Fortune for Afghanistan's President', *New York Times*, 10 September 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/world/asia/afghanistan-election-taliban-talks.html>
 17. Michael Kugelman, 'Taliban has Americans right where it wants them', *Arab News*, 3 August 2019. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1534921>
 18. James Dobbins, Robert P. Finn, Ronald E. Neumann, William Wood, John Negroponte, E. Anthony Wayne, Ryan Crocker, James Cunningham, and Hugo Llorens, 'US-Taliban negotiations: How to avoid rushing to failure', *Atlantic Council*, 3 September 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-taliban-negotiations-how-to-avoid-rushing-to-failure/>
 19. Robbie Gramer, 'Trump's Approach to Afghanistan 'Confusing His Own Negotiators'', *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/10/trumps-approach-to-afghanistan-confusing-his-own-negotiators-south-asia-taliban-talks-former-ambassador-ryan-crocker/>

mortal enemy of the Afghan government, and the Afghan government not included.”²⁰ General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also added his name since, warning against the withdrawal from Afghanistan as he believes the country still needs support to deal with increased levels of violence. He said that the US needs to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and make sure that the country is not a “sanctuary”.

India is likely to be heaving a sigh of relief as it too had not been happy with the scuttled deal. Ghani and his associates were also pleased. He thought that the deal gave away too much and weakened his negotiating position, putting at risk his own political future, especially as the deal was going to be signed before the Afghan Presidential elections.

Surely, Trump will come back to talks with the Taliban sooner or later when the dust has settled and will try to get a better deal. The question is, what will the Taliban have to give him that they were earlier reluctant to give? Cease fire perhaps! He may also demand the start of the intra-Afghan dialogue before he signs the deal. And that brings into the picture Pakistan’s role yet again. Pakistani pressure on the Taliban so far had apparently worked only to the extent of facilitating the US-Taliban part of the agreement, linking the US withdrawal to Taliban assurances that the territory under their control would not be allowed to be used by terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), etc. However, Washington may demand more unless Trump gets desperate for a deal for political reasons, about which one does not know.

20. Negar Mortazavi, ‘US politicians agree on pulling troops out of Afghanistan’ Independent, 14 September 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/us-troops-afghanistan-trump-taliban-talks-peace-war-a9105001.html>

The Taliban: The Main Challenge

The main challenge for the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan will be how to deal with the Taliban in the next phase of the peace deal after the US-Taliban agreement is hopefully resuscitated and finalised. This second phase will crucially focus on the intra-Afghan dialogue and future political set up. Pakistan's help will be crucial to successfully complete the peace process and to avoid continuation of the war with another name.

At the heart of the dilemma as to how far Pakistan can and would like to go in pressuring the Taliban lies in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. If Kabul were united and realised the importance of cooperating with Pakistan, it would have safeguarded Pakistan's interests in return for Islamabad's help in regard to the Taliban. However, Pakistan has to rely on the Taliban as a hedge, because Afghans are in disarray and have no coherent policy towards Pakistan or towards the Taliban. Kabul is not united. It has no common approach or a peace plan. There are serious differences between Pashtun and the erstwhile Northern Alliance that would make it very difficult for the intra-Afghan dialogue to succeed. And that will define the next stage of the Afghan conflict.

The Taliban may be Pakistan's main card, but they are a mixed blessing and pose Pakistan many dilemmas. The Taliban are better disposed to Pakistan while the erstwhile Northern Alliance elements have been anti-Pakistan. Pakistan's main objective will be, if possible, not to let the Taliban come to power in Kabul but also not to leave them out of power either. Both possibilities will be a headache for Pakistan. The Taliban in power in Kabul will have a severe strategic depth inciting the radicalisation of at least parts of Pakistan, and a disenfranchised Taliban will tear away at Pakistan's tribal areas.

Pakistan's other dilemma is that it may not feel politically strong enough to expel the Taliban, as they have a constituency in Pakistan — first the Pashtun affinity, then strong linkages with Pakistan's religious parties and Jihadists. The Taliban sympathisers and supporters have the potential to create trouble for the Pakistan government. Pakistan may thus lack both the political will and the capability to alienate the Taliban. Not to mention that it may even become necessary for Pakistan to support the Taliban if nothing else works for Afghanistan.

Pakistan's best bet is to work with the elected government in Kabul to strengthen its negotiating hand and force the Taliban into a power-sharing arrangement. Kabul too should realise that if it wants Pakistan's help, it must seek friendly relations with Islamabad. Pakistan cannot bring peace to Afghanistan, but it can certainly block it.

The US administration has its own dilemmas in getting Pakistan's help to compel the Taliban to be amenable to the peace process. It could continue the coercive policy of the past or try something different. As David Ignatius observed in an²¹ op-ed in *The Washington Post*, there is an opportunity now for a reset: "The current Pakistani leadership – President Imran Khan and Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa – might be the best potential partners the United States has had in years. It's time to test whether they can deliver."²² Trump's ally in the Congress, Senator Lindsay Graham, also argues for closer ties with Pakistan, saying this "would rattle the Taliban... My advice to the administration is, let's shore up our relations with Pakistan." Islamabad, he said, should be offered a free trade agreement which would be welcomed by Khan's administration to ease its current poor financial situation. Graham said, "The Taliban must be prevented from believing it can seek safe harbour in Pakistan, continuing what they had done in the past."

Not only the US strategy towards Pakistan but also Washington's approach towards Afghanistan needs to be reworked. The stillborn deal with the Taliban did not address this issue. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a hint of what Washington might be thinking of achieving in a new deal.²³ "President Trump", Pompeo said, "was focused on two main objectives: reduction of risk and cost levels for America and peace and stability in Afghanistan... If they [the Taliban] don't deliver on the commitments that they've made to us now for weeks and in some cases months, the president of the United States is not going to reduce the pressure; we're not going to reduce our support for the Afghan Security Forces that have fought so hard there."

Whatever the deal, there will be no change in the reality that Washington and, indeed, Kabul will need Pakistan's help to manage the conflict that might follow America's war. Pakistan shares the Washington strategic community's view about the need for a deal that lays the basis for long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. However, like all other parties directly or indirectly interested in this end goal, it is at a loss as to how to achieve this goal.²⁴

21. David Ignatius, 'Trump has a chance to reset the Table in Afghanistan', *Washington Post*, 9 September 2019. https://beta.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-has-a-chance-to-reset-the-table-in-afghanistan/2019/09/09/df524ea2-d346-11e9-934340db57cf6abd_story.html?wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpmm=1

22. Ibid.

23. Anwar Iqbal, 'US recalls Taliban Negotiator, vows to keep troops in Afghanistan', *Dawn*, 10 September 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1504503/us-recalls-taliban-negotiator-vows-to-keep-troops-in-afghanistan>

24. Michael Kugelman, 'Peace has never been further away from the Afghans who desire it most', *The Hill*, 12 September 2019. <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/461088-peace-has-never-been-further-away-for-the-afghans-who-desire-it-most>

Senior Taliban leader Mullah Baradar, as the head of a Taliban delegation, was in Islamabad in the first week of October 2019 and met with Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi. A statement released after the meeting mentioned that both sides called for the “earliest resumption” of the peace process. Khalilzad was also in town at the same time and reportedly met with the Taliban delegation. It seems efforts are being made to resume the peace process, and Pakistan is playing a key role in this.

Afghanistan, China and India

The US has important security interests in Afghanistan which the war could not fully resolve. The last thing Washington should do is to pull out and leave no regional stakeholders behind whose interests would align with its own. Other countries with stakes in Afghanistan's stability also need to get involved. Until Afghanistan is secure, Chinese economic and strategic aspirations cannot be fully realised. That is why not only the US-Pakistan relationship needs to be improved, but also why the US should also develop some understanding with India, China and Russia. You cannot just pull out and not look back. A limited convergence with China should include Washington's tolerance of China-Pakistan relations.

The day Trump announced the cancellation of the deal with the Taliban, the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan were meeting in Islamabad. In this third meeting of the Trilateral Foreign Ministers Dialogue, they were talking of prospects of economic cooperation upon the return of peace in Afghanistan. In a statement,²⁵ they expressed their support for an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" reconciliation process and emphasised a "comprehensive" peace deal, condemning the Taliban-assisted attacks and hoping for direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. They hoped "the intra-Afghan dialogue, sooner rather than later, would end the violence completely."

Washington, therefore, has to recognise the regional dimension of the search for peace in Afghanistan. Not only China, but India also, in some way, has to be a part of it. That is why Washington has to have a South Asia policy that addresses India-Pakistan relations. The expressions hyphenated and de-hyphenated do not do justice to the realities of how Washington handles its relations with India and Pakistan. There has always been a mix of the two because the fact is the US' relations with one are affected by its relations with the other and by India-Pakistan bilateral relations. India seeks US intervention in fixing Pakistan's "behavior", as if the relations are hyphenated; but when Pakistan seeks US intervention, India claims de-hyphenation. In other words, the US intervention is fine with India if it is on her behalf. This is not fair. The US has to understand that while it cannot treat India and Pakistan equally, it must treat them fairly.

25. Shahid Javed Burki, 'A hiccup on the route to final settlement', *Express Tribune*, 16 September 2019. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2057196/6-hiccup-route-final-settlement>

The Future: South Asia's New Dynamics

The 21st century's unstable power balances, the emerging bipolar US-China rivalry and the post-9/11 security challenges have impacted South Asia. What does the future hold for the US-Pakistan relationship and its implications for Pakistan and the region? Let us begin with the context in which the US-Pakistan relations will likely operate in the future: mainly the geo-strategic landscape, the regional environment and the domestic dynamics within Pakistan.

Briefly, we are talking here of the lengthening strategic shadow of China, the US containment of China through the Indo-Pacific and possibly South Asia, the US-Iran tensions, the rise of India's power and ambitions and Pakistan's domestic challenges, not to mention security issues like the terrorist threat to the US and global security, which the abandoned American war in Afghanistan could resolve only partially. And last but not least, Afghanistan's elusive struggle for peace and stability, which intersects with all these factors.

Pakistan is strategically vital because of its location at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Russia, China, India and Iran. It could benefit from its location or be caught in the cross fire, as South Asia becomes an arena for shifting and overlapping coalitions among regional and global players. Pakistan will be in the eye of a developing storm as it faces, on one side, prospects of failure in Afghanistan, and on the other, continued pressures from an assertive and dominant India, while it continues to cope with its internal challenges – especially Pakistan's own struggle against terrorism and extremism, and efforts at stabilisation of the economy and strengthening of democracy.

Successful navigation of all these challenges by Pakistan would require good relations with all big powers and improvement in relations with neighbours, which becomes an economic and political necessity for Pakistan if it is serious about benefiting from its geographic location by serving as a corridor for trade and energy. Pakistan also needs to maintain the current balance between its relations with Iran and the Arab countries. Future relations with the US will have to be developed by Pakistan within this policy framework.

As for Washington, it faces two main challenges in South Asia – one relates to China the other to Afghanistan. For the first, it needs India, and, for the second, it needs Pakistan. A particular conundrum for Washington will be how to handle India-Pakistan relations and their impact on America's own relations with each of them and on its geopolitical and regional interests in South Asia.

India has sought Washington's help to strengthen its hands vis-à-vis Pakistan, particularly to change its 'behaviour'. And, with its tough approach towards

Pakistan, it has hoped to help advance US interests in South Asia. Balancing China and containing Pakistan, knitted together by opposition to the CPEC, reflect and affect these policies, as do India's relations with Afghanistan. India hopes it will thus advance its own interests as well as those of the US. And this mutuality of interests is an important feature of the extraordinary new US-India relationship. Washington has used its own pressure on Pakistan to advance its interests as well as those of India which it shares, like the concern about the presence of Jihadists in Pakistan. However, the US has a dilemma. It has to be mindful of where its pressure on behalf of India, which serves Washington's own interests as well, ends and only starts serving India's interests. And that is not going to be easy.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 5 August 2019 move on Kashmir has presented the US with new challenges. It has heightened India-Pakistan tensions and could raise the US' concerns about whether Pakistan may have to move troops away from its Western border, affecting the ground situation in Afghanistan. The US pressure on Pakistan to act against the Jihadists may be stepped up, as they can provoke an incident in the current India-Pakistan tensions, with attendant consequences for the Afghan peace process.

Being mindful of US concerns and their fall out on Pakistan, Prime Minister Khan has unambiguously stated that militants from Pakistan who would carry out violence in Kashmir are enemies of both Kashmiris and Pakistan²⁶ – “Such a person would be an enemy of Pakistan and Kashmir” – adding that India would exploit such violence and blame the country for sponsoring terrorism in Kashmir. This has prompted US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Alice Wells to tweet:

“Applaud PM@ImranKhanPTI's unambiguous & important statement that militants from Pakistan who would carry out violence in Kashmir are enemies of both Kashmiris & Pakistan. We agree. Pakistan's sustained commitment to counter all terrorist groups is critical to reg. stability. AGW.”

A similar dilemma confronts Washington in regard to its China containment policy, that is, how to reconcile it with American interests in Pakistan. The US may not try to mix the two by opposing China-Pakistan relations through opposition to the CPEC or other measures because it will alienate China, whose cooperation is needed in Afghanistan. China needs stabilisation of

26. Salman Siddiqi, 'US applauds Prime Minister Imran Khan's statement on Kashmir', *Oye Yeah news*, September 2019. <https://www.oyeyeah.com/news/us-applaudsimran-khans-statement-on-kashmir/>

Afghanistan for the sake of the Belt and Road Initiative's success. Perhaps already mindful of the Chinese role in Afghanistan and also that of Russia, the US has a trilateral forum with China and Russia engaged in an ongoing dialogue over Afghanistan. Their last meeting was in July 2019 in Beijing, where they showed appreciation for Pakistan's role.

Despite the new Cold War, the US may thus find it expedient to cooperate with China and Pakistan to stabilise the Afghan economy in a post-settlement scenario, including through Afghanistan's integration into the CPEC. Besides, both the US and China have a shared interest in Pakistan's fight against the Jihadists. So there will possibly be a limited US-China convergence in the near future, at least.

Even if no convergence occurs, US opposition to CPEC should not be a policy option. It would weaken and destabilise Pakistan, which is not in Washington's interest. In fact, Washington may feel it is important for Pakistan to have good relations with China, up to a point, as China supplements US pressure on Pakistan over the Taliban and Jihadists – a shared interest of both the US and China. China's influence over Islamabad is of course much higher than that of the US. Similarly, China feels it is important for Pakistan to have good relations with the US, up to a point, as it serves some of China's own interests since Washington can play the useful role of bad cop while China behaves as good cop. China would, thus, not like to object to US-Pakistan relations, nor would Washington like to rock China-Pakistan relations.

It is not just America – China too is pivoting to Asia and the Middle East, and Pakistan is where the two pivots face off. From Washington's perspective, Pakistan should not be left entirely dependent on China. All things considered, the US may like to have good relations with Pakistan. The US needs enhanced cooperation from Pakistan not only to resolve the Afghanistan situation and to get Pakistan's help in fighting transnational terrorists like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, but also because stability in South Asia is one of the US goals. Maintaining good relations with Pakistan is important in the defence field, which is important as a means of ensuring stability in the region. Pakistan's nuclear assets and their safety also remain a national interest for Washington. The US may thus not push Pakistan to the wall, which might cause an instability that would threaten the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

The US interests were well summed up by former US Ambassador to Islamabad, Richard Olson, in a Congressional testimony on 27 April 2019, "Pakistan is strategically vital due to its role in issues that matter to us, as well as its location at the crossroads of Afghanistan, India, China and Iran.

American national interests require that we stay engaged as Pakistan charts its long-term future.” Elsewhere in the testimony, he added, “Pakistan is critical to a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, strategic stability in the subcontinent, countering violent extremism and defeating terrorists that threaten the U.S. and the region.”

Future US-Pakistan relations are thus going to face more challenges than opportunities. For now, any opportunity or hope one may have had of friendly relations between India and Pakistan – or of a boost in the economic cooperation in the region – has been set back by the Kashmir crisis triggered by Modi’s 5 August 2019 action to rescind the state’s special status. In Pakistan, there is a strong domestic pressure on the government to support Kashmir, but Pakistan knows the international community is not going to help much. And that puts all the onus of pursuing the Kashmir cause through bilateral avenues. But bilaterally, India has slammed the door to negotiations by making Kashmir an internal issue. So Pakistan has no option but to restrict diplomatic, political and economic ties with India, which it has begun doing. The relations will thus remain in the cold storage indefinitely.

However, opportunities do exist, depending on a positive evolution of the situation in Afghanistan, regional dynamics and geo-political competition.²⁷ Pakistan could end up serving as “an ideal corridor for trade, energy and tourism and a great facilitator for the whole region.” Afghanistan could be integrated into the CPEC and projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000) ventures. And with all this, “Hopefully the US will perceive the economic momentum in Asia, unleashed by the Belt and Road Initiative and Asian economic integration, as a strategic opportunity rather than a challenge.” However, these are all big ifs.

27. Munir Akram, ‘Future of US Pakistan relations’, *Dawn*, 12 May 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1481779/future-of-pak-us-relations>

Conclusion

It has not been a normal bilateral relationship, especially since the post 9/11 US re-engagement with Pakistan. Both sides have behaved expediently under domestic political pressure as the issues being handled in their ongoing engagement evoke high public interest and affect politics. The politics of the issues have been as salient as the policy. For the US, these issues are threats from extremism and terrorism, the safety of Pakistan's nuclear assets, and the success and failure of the Afghanistan war. And for Pakistan the issues happen to be Washington's relationship with India, its negativity towards the CPEC, and economic and diplomatic pressure against Pakistan. And there are certain systemic issues in foreign policy on both sides weighing on the relationship.

One problem is that because of Washington's expectation of total compliance from governments that are recipient of US aid, and insensitivity to their political constraints, Pakistan has been caught between Washington's demand to do more and public demands to do less. Even the government itself wants to do less because of its own perceptions of what it feels is in its national interest. However, the government does not want to lose the aid, even if Washington makes impossible demands that it cannot fulfill. That has often led to half-hearted actions which leave both the Pakistani public and Washington unhappy. And that is a recipe for recurring irritants.

For fear of losing aid, Pakistan promises things which it knows it cannot deliver. Hence, this dichotomy between Pakistan's word and deed leads to allegations of duplicity. However, Pakistan has not been any more duplicitous than Washington, in that the latter has always made promises it knew it could not keep, but had to in order to retain Pakistan's cooperation. And that has been the hallmark of the largely transactional relationship between the two countries. Pakistanis are perhaps more willing to admit this reality than the Americans, who feel they have done nothing wrong. The reality is both parties suffer from an attitude of self-righteousness.

For the longer run, the US needs to put in place a new Pakistan policy post-Afghanistan exit based on a more realistic assessment of each other's interests, policies and capabilities to help as a partner. The old policy has been too negative – basically a derivative of US policies on India, China and Afghanistan and on combating Jihadists. These were all used as pressure points and impacted Pakistan adversely.

For the future, Washington has to make up its mind as to what would be the best way to get Pakistan's cooperation – by extracting concessions through continued pressure or involve it in a long-term mutually beneficial relationship

compatible with the overall US engagement with South Asia. The policy must understand Pakistan's constraints and its historical security concerns on its eastern and western borders.

It seems Washington is experimenting with a new approach to the relations by bringing the relationship to a level that is more sustainable (euphemism for lower) and using the leverage of aid not as a punishment by suspending it, but rather as an inducement to influence Pakistan policies by packaging an aid initiative in such a way that it looks more like an offer of reward. This approach will not inspire confidence in a long-term relationship, and needs a rethink.

The lack of a proper US strategy towards Pakistan may lead to Pakistan joining a possible China-Pakistan-Iran axis.²⁸ China's emerging partnership with Iran will put pressure on an isolated Pakistan to join it. It would be in Washington's interest to prevent this. And that prevention cannot take place through coercion; in fact, coercion would spur the opposite. The US can interrupt the axis by strengthening US-Pakistan relations.

Washington has to understand that if it keeps complaining that it does not have a good partner in Pakistan, then it must recognise that if it wants better partners, it has to have better policies. Pakistan should not be expected to compensate for the failures of US policies like in Afghanistan. And whether one is talking of tactical nuclear weapons or the continued presence of Jihadists in Pakistan (about which the US has concerns), the issue is India-Pakistan relations. Similarly, Pakistan's support for the Taliban has to do not just with India, but also more fundamentally with Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which have been troubled since their inception. The US needs a South Asia policy which should address the totality of US geo-political, regional and bilateral interests – both economic and strategic.

Finally, if Washington handles the complexities of its relationship with Pakistan successfully by finding a modus vivendi with China and developing a South Asia policy that addresses all its interests, and Pakistan improves its relationship with the neighbours, there could be opportunities for both the US and Pakistan for an enhanced relationship.

As for Pakistan, it has to realise that if it wants friendly relations with the US it has to do more to accommodate American interests. As they say, there is no free lunch. On the other hand, if Pakistan – for any understandable reasons – does not want or cannot change its own policies and help Washington, then

28. Munir Akram, 'China Strikes back', *Dawn*, 15 September 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1505306>

it should be prepared to see the relations diminished. It cannot have it both ways.

Pakistan should also understand the limitations of these relations. Pakistan wants a strategic partnership with the US, but Washington cannot oblige. Such a relationship would run up against the strategic relationship with India and the containment of China and Iran, not to mention even long-term US interests in Afghanistan.

For Pakistan, the challenge is how to turn this present transactional relationship from a relationship in which Pakistan is being pressured to fall in line to serve Washington's objectives in South Asia, to a relationship that may fall short of being strategic but should at least give Pakistan a status of a partner or ally and not just a target. Pakistan can be a useful economic and trading partner apart from cooperating with Washington on security issues. There is an enormous potential for an enhanced economic relationship that has the potential to benefit the ordinary people in Pakistan economically, which will be beneficial to the US image there and an understanding of its interests and policies.

As of now, the possibility of such developments looks remote, as neither the US is capable of a grand design in foreign policy, given the overhang of politics on its public policy and its heavy commitment to India nor is Pakistan capable of a creative foreign policy, given its entrenchment in security issues and apparent fear of, if not ambivalence towards, Jihadi outfits. Pakistan is certainly not supporting militant organisations, but it needs to take stronger action against them for its own sake. Whether for survival or progress, Pakistan's foreign policy will have to find a balance between addressing its external security challenges and meeting its development needs at home. And the US will have to rethink its whole approach to South Asia.

About the Author

Professor Touqir Hussain is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore. Mr Hussain is a former senior diplomat from Pakistan, having served as Ambassador to Brazil, Spain and Japan (1998-2003). He also held senior positions in the Pakistani Foreign Office, including that of Additional Foreign Secretary heading the bureaus of the Middle East and of the Americas and Europe. From 1996 to 1998, he was Diplomatic Adviser to the Prime Minister.

Since 2004, he has been pursuing an academic career in the United States (US). He was a Senior Fellow at the US Institute of Peace (2004-2005) and Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Globalization George Washington University (2006-2010). Currently, he is adjunct faculty at Georgetown University and Syracuse University. Earlier, he had also taught at Johns Hopkins University and at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

His overall specialisation is in South Asian security issues, Iran, Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations, civil military relations, democracy in the Islamic world, political Islam, terrorism and the US' relations with the Islamic world. He has written for American and Pakistani newspapers and publications like *Foreign Policy*, *The Diplomat* and *The National Interest*. He has also written policy briefs for the Middle East Institute in Washington DC and has also appeared on the PBS News Hour, Al Jazeera and Voice of America.

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Institute of South Asian Studies

National University of Singapore

29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace

#08-06 (Block B)

Singapore 119620

Tel (65) 6516 4239

Fax (65) 6776 7505

URL www.isas.nus.edu.sg