

Prospects for Pak-US Relationship under President Biden

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Summary

Since independence, Pakistan has followed one-sided pro-United States (US) policies. However, the relations have been mostly vacillating. In the current geostrategic environment, and amidst the increased confrontation between the US and China, the relevance the America accords to Pakistan is restricted to Afghanistan and is marred by its close alliance with China and the strategic importance of India. Pakistan has been one of the worst sufferers from war-torn Afghanistan and has played a key role in negotiating the Peace Accord between the US and the Taliban. The prospects for Pakistan-US relations under President Joe Biden will remain in the context of Afghanistan and limited to economic and military assistance. In an anti-regional framework formed by Iran, China and Russia, the US' reliance on Pakistan is likely to grow even after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Introduction

Pakistan continues to be in the limelight in relation to the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan and other geostrategic issues. One of the major foreign policy decisions of American President Joe Biden's administration has been the compliance of a Donald Trump-era Peace Accord with the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan has facilitated these dialogues, interrupted many a time, before an agreement was signed on 29 February 2020. This accord bears in it the seeds of many enigmas faced by Afghanistan today. The chequered history of Pakistan-United States (US) relations reflects a vacillating, episodic partnership. Both the previous US presidents, Barack Obama and Trump, began their presidencies with Pakistan being seen in a negative light but later adjusted to a workable relationship. The context then and even now in Biden's presidency has been mostly Afghanistan and the fight against terrorists. In the South Asian region, and with China flexing political and military muscles, there have been many strategic developments with global reverberations. The US foreign policy shift under the Biden administration from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region, the invigoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), competitiveness on the brink of confrontation with China and a growing strategic partnership with India have contributed to the primacy of the Asian region. Pakistan, by virtue of its strategic location as a gateway to South and Central Asia, remains a critical stakeholder in the power politics of South Asia.

The US was one of the first few countries with which Pakistan established diplomatic relations in October 1947. Ever since, it has been a supporter of US foreign policy and became a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organisation in 1955. Pakistan's one-sided policies during the Cold War era constituted the main reason for the Soviet Union signing a Strategic Peace Treaty with India in 1971 and later treaties. Pakistan played a deciding role in fostering US-China diplomatic relations in 1970, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the US totally abandoned the region, viewed as a betrayal for the

services rendered by Pakistan, and even subjected it to sanctions in the 1990s.¹ The US has, on its part, attempted to lessen tensions between Pakistan and India on many occasions. It assisted Pakistan with economic aid and is a major supplier of military equipment. America remains the largest export destination for Pakistan. In essence, it can be extrapolated that the relations between the US and Pakistan have been strictly on military and economic support.

After the 9/11 attack and initial squabbles, the relationship between Pakistan and the US has been one of cooperation. The US has mostly pursued the policy of the creation of a more stable, democratic Pakistan that actively pursues fights against militancy and extends support to the US in combating terrorists in Afghanistan.² Seen as a key player in efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, Pakistan was among the leading recipients of US foreign aid and service charges for combat support. However, during the last decade, Pakistan appears to have lost its status as a foreign policy priority for the US. While, in the past, it strived to balance its relations between Pakistan and India, America now visibly favours India. The security and terrorism-oriented framework is being altered by two significant shifts: increasing enmity between the US and China, which is Pakistan's closest ally, and the US' military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Misperceptions of Pakistan Sponsoring Terrorism

Since 2001, Pakistan has been a frontline state in the fight against terrorism. After the US and 46 nations invaded Afghanistan, it was the recipient of five million Afghan refugees, some of who have returned, but of which 2.2 million still remain. The influx of Afghan refugees has brought a gun and narcotics culture, besides fuelling extremism and terrorism. In the last 20 years, some estimates state Pakistan has suffered almost 80,000 civilian and security personnel deaths and US\$150 billion (S\$203.04 billion) in economic losses.³ After Afghanistan, Pakistan has been the worst sufferer from this war. Despite these sacrifices and support extended to the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Afghanistan, Pakistan continues to be accused of not doing enough.

Bilateral relations with the US tend to be marred by many misperceptions, such as the notion that Pakistan sponsors terrorism and harbours Taliban leadership, besides providing sanctuaries to them; it is a rightist country where the army runs the state; and that it is risky for travel and investment, amongst other things. A rationale counter to these misgivings is that it is a documented fact that at least since 2010, the US has been in contact with the Taliban and has been negotiating a peace deal with support from Pakistan.⁴ There may be

¹ "US Sanctions", Historypak.com, <https://historypak.com/u-s-sanctions/>.

² K Alan Kronstadt, "Pakistan-US Relations", In Focus, US Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11270>.

³ "Pakistan National Security Outlook: A Conversation with Pakistan National Security Adviser, Moeed Yousaf, United States Institute of Peace, 5 August 2021. <https://www.usip.org/events/pakistans-national-security-outlook>.

⁴ Naseer Saghafi-Ameri, "Prospects for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan", Afghanistan Regional Dialogue Background Paper No. 1, SIPRI Afghanistan Regional Dialogue, June 2011, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2016-04/ARD01.pdf>; and "US created and supported Taliban and abandoned Pakistan, says Hillary", *Dawn*, 25 April 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/847153/us-created-taliban-and-abandoned-pakistan-sayshillary>.

veracity in the Taliban's initial training and recruitment in Pakistan since their appearance in 1994. However, during the US and NATO presence, the Taliban controlled 30 to 48 per cent of rural Afghanistan with impunity. Hence, why would they require a foreign land with the involved risks? Similarly, their leadership has remained inside Afghanistan to avoid exposure to US drones and to exercise control over divergent groups. It cannot, however, be denied that some leaders may have travelled or even resided inside Pakistan for unspecified periods, given the nature of the 2,640 kilometres-long, porous Pak-Afghan border.

Another important fact is that since 1979, Pakistan has been extending medical and humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees, amongst whom it is virtually impossible to identify terrorists. Even with satellite imagery at its disposal, the US could not detect Osama bin Laden living a few kilometres away from its forces⁵ or the fact that Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), though banned by the US, has all its leadership and bases in Afghanistan. If there were any Taliban sanctuaries inside Pakistan, the US could have exercised the option of drone strikes.

There may be some justifiability that Pakistan suffers from radicalisation, but again this may also be pertinent to many other countries like even the US, where 'White Extremism' is cited as the most serious threat⁶ and the rise of the thrice-banned Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India.⁷ The reality is that religious parties have never been able to form a government in Pakistan and have only won a handful of seats in all elections. The last military takeover in Pakistan ended in 2008 and, thereafter, there have been regular elections and functioning of democratic institutions.

Today, Pakistan is one of the most profitable destinations for foreign investment. US entrepreneurs like Coca Cola, MacDonald's and PepsiCo are earning a double-digit profit with no restrictions on the transfer of equity. The explainable reasons for the continuing aspersions on Pakistan are that it confronts two of the strongest opinion makers in the US: the Jewish and Indian lobbies. The other reasons are the lack of sustained diplomatic and political efforts as well as failures of extending communications to all tiers of American society.

America's Foreign Policy towards Pakistan

The salient contours of America's foreign policy towards Pakistan have remained related to 'relevance' and 'implied' factors. In the context of Afghanistan, Pakistan remains relevant even after the withdrawal of US troops. The two implied facets are Pakistan's geostrategic partnership with China in the wake of its increasing enmity with US and the strategic importance of India. In negotiating the US-Taliban Peace Agreement in Doha, Pakistan has

⁵ "How We Failed to Get bin Laden and Why it Matters Today", A Report to the Members of US Congress Committee on Foreign Relations, 30 November 2009, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4929910>.

⁶ Seth G Jones and Catrina Doxsee, "The Escalating Terrorism Problem in US", Washington Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 17 June 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>.

⁷ Rajesh Joshi, "The Hindu Hardline RSS Who Sees Modi as Their Own", *BBC News*, 22 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-29593336>.

played a key role in using its influence on the Taliban.⁸ The text of the agreement remained the exclusive purview of US and Taliban negotiators, and Pakistan or other regional stake holders did not have any say in the final outcome. The accord included guarantees by the Taliban against the use of Afghan soil by any group or individual against the security of the US and its allies in return for the withdrawal of American troops in 14 months and an intra-Afghan dialogue.

As is apparent from the accord, the stability and political dispensation of Afghanistan were given only cosmetic consideration. An astute framework for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan should have involved major regional players like Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia. Biden, after initial reservations about the Doha Accord, decided in favour of it, given the timeline for the US troops withdrawal. In retrospect, it is easy to determine that US planners, military and intelligence misjudged the capacity and wherewithal of the 300,000 strong Afghan National Army (ANA) they have been training for decades and underestimated the Taliban's warring potential.⁹ In a span of a month, Taliban now control Kabul and border crossings with all neighbouring states. ANA, the mainstay of the unpopular Ashraf Ghani government, surrendered at all places without even a fight, despite, according to Biden, the US spending US\$1 trillion (S\$1.34 trillion) on raising and equipping them and continuing to provide them with logistics, air support and pay.¹⁰

In the Afghan imbroglio lies the biggest foreign policy dilemma for Pakistan! If the US and its public opinion see troops withdrawal from Afghanistan as a defeat of the US, resulting in a fallout with the Biden administration, it could be conveniently shifted to Pakistan as supporters of the Taliban. Pakistan, contrary to the widespread belief in the West, does not have the leverage over the Taliban it had enjoyed in the past, which is further diminishing day-by-day, after the withdrawal of American troops and giving up virtual control of Afghanistan. If it had that kind of a say, wouldn't it have made an effort to sever links between the Taliban and TTP? It is in the interest of Pakistan, like the US, to give a semblance of US success in Afghanistan, after almost US\$2 trillion (S\$2.73 trillion) economics losses and 2,480 American casualties over 20 years.¹¹ Alternatively, Pak-US relations would continue to be besieged by the stigma of a US failure. A homegrown and Afghan-driven peace is also a pre-requisite for the growth of a fragile Pakistan economy, control of domestic terrorism and its efforts to promote regional trade. Despite America's short memory span, Biden's admission, citing ANA failures in surrendering to the Taliban without a fight, and not accusing Pakistan, augurs well for removing potential irritants.¹² The US and Pakistan generally share similar perspectives on Afghanistan, though they pursue different modalities. This mistrust needs to be bridged through a sustained dialogue at political and military levels.

⁸ Ayaz Gul, "US Hails Pakistan's Role in Advancing Afghan Peace Process", VOA, 14 September 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/us-hails-pakistans-role-advancing-afghan-peace-process>.

⁹ Jamie Shea, "Afghanistan: if it costs this much, there has to be a better way", Friends of Europe, 7 May 2021, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/afghanistan-if-it-costs-this-much-there-has-to-be-a-better-way/>.

¹⁰ Amanda Macias, "Biden says Afghans must fight for themselves", CNBC, 10 August 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/10/biden-says-afghans-must-fight-for-themselves-as-taliban-advances.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

America's foreign policy imperatives of seeing Pakistan from the prism of its relations with China and India have created an impression in Pakistan that its salience to Washington will be both diminished and coloured. The US abandonment of the region after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and imposition of sanctions later against Pakistan, combined with a hostile Eastern neighbour, left it with no other choice than to tilt towards China. Beijing, as an "all weather friend", has remained Pakistan's primary international benefactor, arms supplier and source of foreign direct investment.

The China Connection

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor launched in 2014 aims to connect the Gwadar deep-sea port with Western China, and has so far brought US\$66 billion (S\$90 billion) in investment. China can also play a critical role in rebuilding Afghanistan and its economic prosperity. Pakistan's conflict and rivalry with India, which the US views as a strategic partner in countering China, have also contributed to the loss of its relevance. This is even as US policy aims to create a rapprochement between India and Pakistan both for world peace and to curtail Chinese influence. However, the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir remains a major impediment. Trump, on many occasions, offered to mediate in resolving the contentious issues between two nuclear rivals, but was repeatedly declined by India.¹³ India's alleged use of Afghan soil to foment terrorism and create a 'second front' for Pakistan, and its support to a secessionist movement in Baluchistan, are perceived by many in Pakistan as occurring with covert US support.

Biden's priority remains with domestic issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, US economy and US\$2 trillion (S\$2.73 trillion) infrastructure bill, etc.¹⁴ Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has become the prime formulator of US foreign policy. Biden has spoken to a sizeable number of heads of state and governments but has so far not called the prime minister of Pakistan. This has become a visible irritant between the two countries, though it does not have to be! The US foreign policy planners fully appreciate that even after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, they will need Pakistan's support and that of its army in the region. America's strained relations with Iran also makes reliance on Pakistan all the more imperative. The other reality is that Biden, a hardliner on China, is personally convinced that US-Sino confrontation will grow and that they should woo India into a strategic partnership. That does not imply the US is writing off Pakistan. In the new budget, the US has included potentially tens of millions of dollars for Pakistani support, much of which will go to health and education sectors, while it will also be a recipient of the US\$13.8 million (S\$18.55 million) earmarked for regional International Military Education and Training.¹⁵

¹³ "On Kashmir and Pakistan, Donald Trump offers mediation but with a twist," *India Today*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/on-kashmir-and-pakistan-donald-trump-offers-mediation-but-with-a-twist-1649930-2020-02-25>; and "US President Trump reiterates offer to mediate Kashmir crisis", *Aljazeera*, 24 September 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/24/us-president-trump-reiterates-offer-to-mediate-kashmir-crisis>.

¹⁴ Warren P Strobel and Vivian Salama, "Biden's Foreign Policy Takes a Back Seat to Domestic Priorities", *Wall Street Journal*, 1 May 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-foreign-policy-takes-a-back-seat-to-domestic-priorities-11619861400>.

¹⁵ "US Budget and Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, 25 August 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2302650/us-budget-and-pakistan>.

There is a trust deficit between US and Pakistan, which is likely to grow as the Taliban exercise political control over Afghanistan. The avenue the partners should exploit to strengthen bilateral relations in the changed environments is a shift to geo-economics. After decades of a close geostrategic alliance with the US, Pakistan now finds itself driven by intangible parameters in its bilateral relations. History tells us that Pak-US relations under the Biden Administration are likely to get worse before they get better.

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