

Pakistan and the US-India Partnership

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Summary

A series of recent developments between the United States (US) and Pakistan have raised concerns in the Indian foreign policy community about the US rebalancing relations between Delhi and Islamabad. These developments include the US' supply of F-16 equipment to Pakistan. While India has raised objections to the resumption of military cooperation between the US and Pakistan, Delhi is more than confident about the future of its own deepening partnership with Washington.

Is Pakistan becoming a fly once again in the ointment for India's expanding strategic partnership with the United States (US)? The recent kerfuffle over the renewed US engagement with Pakistan, however, appears to be a storm in a teacup rather than a major change in the US approach to the South Asian siblings and rivals – India and Pakistan. The suspicions in the Indian foreign policy community about any US relations with Pakistan are deep. While the government continues to reflect these concerns in response to developments between Washington and Islamabad, Delhi might be aware that a potential US role in balancing the Chinese influence in Pakistan does serve Indian interests. So does a US policy moving Pakistan away from support to terror and towards regional economic integration.

For quite some time now, Pakistan appeared completely marginal to the rapid evolution of India-US relations. The chill between Washington and Islamabad that began under the administration of Donald Trump seemed to continue under the Joe Biden administration. That, however, appeared to be changing in the last few weeks.

Three recent developments between Washington and Islamabad have generated some heat in the Indian discourse on relations with the US. One was the announcement that the US was supplying equipment to support the maintenance of F-16 fighter aircrafts sold to Pakistan in the 1980s.

The external affairs minister of India, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, [publicly criticised](#) the US' justification that the sale was to promote counter-terror objectives. Although the F-16s cannot be used to deal with terrorists, the sale appears to be part of the renewed counter-terror cooperation between Washington and Rawalpindi, where the Pakistan army is headquartered.

Some analysts see the sale as a reward for the Pakistan army's recent reported cooperation in targetting terrorists based in Afghanistan. There is speculation that [Pakistan might have facilitated](#) the US drone attack that killed al-Qaeda's chief, Ayman Al Zawahiri.

Second, Pakistani Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, travelled to Washington on an extended visit in early October 2022, soon after Jaishankar's trip there. General Bajwa's visit to the US had been planned long before but had to be postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. General Bajwa was apparently eager to [renew the relationship with the US](#) after former Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure suggested that Pakistan was drifting into the anti-American camp in the region.

Third, the US ambassador to Pakistan was on a visit to the Kashmir region controlled by Pakistan and referred to it as 'AJK' – short for [Azad Jammu and Kashmir](#). This [set off alarm bells in Delhi](#), where many wondered if the US was getting back to activism on the Kashmir question.

Together, these three developments led to much concern in Delhi that the Biden administration might be [rebalancing the US' relations](#) with India and Pakistan. Others have argued that the new US endearment with Pakistan might be a response to [India's reluctance](#) to criticise Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, this speculation on re-hyphenation, the Russian connection or the envoy's visit to Kashmir does not stand closer scrutiny.

The current US policy in the Subcontinent is not a replay of the 20th century Cold War. The recently released [US National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) underlines the central role of India in Washington's competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. Having defined China as the most 'consequential threat' and the Indo-Pacific as the main arena of competition, the US is stepping up its engagement with India. "As India is the world's largest democracy and a Major Defense Partner, the United States and India will work together, bilaterally and multilaterally, to support our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific," it says.

Pakistan is not mentioned in the NSS. As the US' focus shifts from Afghanistan to the Indo-Pacific and from land wars to the maritime rivalry with China, Delhi has become a far more significant partner for the US in recent years. In the second half of the 20th century, Pakistan was clearly the primary partner for the US in the Subcontinent. Today, India has taken that place in the Subcontinent and the broader Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, there might be good reasons for India to welcome the US' engagement with Pakistan that is focussed on limiting the Chinese influence, weaning it away from supporting terrorism and nudging it towards reconciliation with its neighbours.

India, which in the past has sought to keep the US away from the Subcontinent, is today [welcoming the US](#) to play a constructive role in the region in order to blunt the growing Chinese influence in the region. But Pakistan has remained an exception to this policy, given the depth of the conflict. The time may have come for India to explore the possibilities of working with the US to promote positive changes in Pakistan.

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