**A case for continued engagement**

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Islamabad decided to skip the US Summit for Democracy held on December 9-10. A total of 110 countries, as well as the EU as an institution, were invited to the two-day summit. In a statement, Pakistan’s Foreign Office asserted that since Pakistan was “in contact with the US on a range of issues,” it believed that it could “engage on this subject at an opportune time in the future."

It is pertinent to note that Bangladesh was not invited primarily because it was trying and executing alleged war criminals sympathetic to the cause of a united Pakistan through a judicial process that defied human rights and due process of law. Still, Pakistan chose not to attend the summit. Observers believe that the primary reason for Pakistan’s non-participation was China because it was not invited while Taiwan was. Such opinions were lent credence by the fact that a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Office tweeted about Pakistan being the ‘iron brother’ for declining the invite.

Quite interestingly, however, the visit of a four-member Congressional delegation of US Senators coincided with the Summit for Democracy in Washington. The high-level Congressional delegation included members of the Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence who met with Prime Minister Imran Khan as well as COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa. During his meeting with the delegation, the prime minister expressed his hope for strengthening mutual understanding between the two countries and forging closer people-to-people contacts.

People-to-people contacts between Pakistan and the US were not high on the agenda of the visiting delegation, though. The visit was about evacuating the remaining US citizens from the country wanting to go back and finding ways to funnel US taxpayer money to the people of Afghanistan bypassing the Taliban. Even this limited US interest makes Pakistani policymakers see light at the end of the tunnel. They view the limited US contact with Pakistan as a window to continue to engage with them.

The US side has also signalled towards continuing to engage with Pakistan on Afghanistan. Besides the meeting of the senators with Pakistan’s prime minister and the army chief, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West also met with Pakistan’s army chief on the 20th of December to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. The meeting took place on the heels of the 17th Extraordinary Session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers on the 19th, wherein Islamabad attempted to woo the Muslim world to support Afghanistan.

Although the developments suggest that Pakistan will continue to remain relevant for the US with regard to Afghanistan, the level of engagement is unlikely to be anything near what it was between 2002 and 2016. The primary reason is that the overall relevance of Afghanistan for the US has considerably diminished after the withdrawal of its security forces from the country.

This calls for renewed perspective on bilateral relations on both sides for a variety of reasons. One, even though the war might have ended in Afghanistan, the country will need foreign assistance for keeping it away from becoming a hub of terrorism and poppy cultivation if not for purely humanitarian reasons. This means opportunities for renewed collaboration between Pakistan and the US.

Two, since its war in Afghanistan has come to an end, perhaps, it is time for US decisionmakers to conduct long-term stand-alone policy planning for Pakistan. Pakistan is an important regional country that is considered close to China. If the overall focus of the US is shifting from fighting the war on terror in Afghanistan and elsewhere to the containment of China, Pakistan cannot be ignored on that count either. The US cannot solely rely on India to do its bidding in the region through grandstanding against China. The US, as Prime Minister Imran Khan has also suggested, might also need a country that is trusted by China but also readily accessible to the US. Therefore, if Washington continues to minimally and reluctantly engage Pakistan for its concerns with regard to Afghanistan and tries to wash its hands off of it for the good part of other matters, it is doing a disservice to its newfound global ambition of containment of China too.

Three, the US administration might have misgivings about engaging Pakistan on matters of regional security, but it could very well work with Pakistan in areas of civilian cooperation. Not long ago, the US Congress authorised the $7.5 billion worth Kerry-Lugar Pakistan Aid Package with an annual disbursement of $1.5 billion per year from 2009 to 2013. The assistance package, inter alia, was aimed at strengthening democracy, promoting economic freedom, and investing in people. Even though the actual disbursement eventually turned out to be smaller and much else can be said about its overall effectiveness, it was neither a bad initiative nor has the on-ground situation in Pakistan changed for something on the lines to become irrelevant.

Pakistan remains under a constant threat of religious extremism and terrorism and its democratic institutions remain weak. The lynching of a Sri Lankan national at the hands of an angry mob in the town of Sialkot on blasphemy charges, the massive street-level power show of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan leading to the official delisting of the group as a proscribed organisation, the steady rise of the banned TTP, and the uptick in terrorist attacks in the country are just some of the symptoms of the growing challenges for a country that has just emerged out of a long spell of internal violence.

Democracy in Pakistan remains weak. The country scored 37 out of 100 on the global freedom index of the Freedom House for the year 2021. For the same year, it scored 25 out of 100 in terms of internet freedom. The country has not scored much better in the previous years as well and its shrinking economy is adding to the challenges of its democratic institutions. Protection of freedom in Pakistan should, thus, remain an important pillar in the US foreign policy for the region for strengthening its democratic institutions, service delivery, and social welfare.

Pakistan and the US share a long history of a chequered relationship marked by ups and downs. There is no denying the fact, however, that there does remain a strong people-to-people element between the two countries owing to a large and important Pakistani diaspora living in the US and recurring bouts of government-to-government cooperation on a variety of matters, including in the field of security. Given the mood in Washington, it might not prove to be an easy sell – but the arguments do have some merit alongside their intrinsic idealistic value.

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