**B3W vs BRI**

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THE developing situation in Afghanistan has once again triggered an existential crisis in the US-Pakistan relationship. Forget years of mumblings about making the relationship more holistic, we`re in a back-to-the-future scenario with a focus on security and anti-terrorism.

But the conversation is a bit different (so far, at least). Pakistan has refused to host US bases, and has made clear it will not engage in military conflict with the Afghan Taliban.

US President Joe Biden continues to give Pakistan the cold shoulder, and has yet to speak with our prime minister. When they do speak, expect throwback discussions, with Washington asking Islamabad to `do more`, even though the limitations of Pakistan`s leverage over the Afghan Taliban are clear.

It seems difficult to imagine how the two countries might argue over anything other than Afghanistan and potential regional or global terrorism threats resulting from instability across the Durand Line over the coming decade. But there may be another conversation in the offing.

The G7 recently announced the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W), a commitment to invest up to $40 trillion to plug the infrastructure gap in lowand middle-income countries exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.

This initiative gives Islamabad a new framework within which to engage with Washington beyond the security realm.

The B3W is pitched as a challenge to China`s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a key part of the US plan to counter China`s growing global influence. There is therefore a knee-jerk sense that there will be no place for Pakistan in B3W planning, especially given that CPEC is among the most strategic and well-developed aspects of the BRI, mounting challenges and disruptions notwithstanding. Biden`s snub to Pakistan at a recent environmental roundtable also suggests B3W talks may be a non-starter.

But speaking to the New York Times last week, Imran Khan got it right when he asked `why do we have to choose sides either it`s the US or China? I think we should have a relationship with everyone`. Balancing relationships between competing superpowers is the only viable option for Pakistan.

It helps that despite a B3W versus BRI media narrative, the initiatives are likely to be complementary. BRPs focus is on strategic infrastructure such as ports, and most expenditure to date has been on transport and power. The B3W, meanwhile, will focus on climate, health, digital technology, and gender equity and equality.

It remains to be seen whether China embraces a parallel approach or seeks to clamp down B3W ambitions by tramping onthe same terrain. China has since 2015 been pushing for a `Digital Silk Road` that would overlay traditional infrastructure projects developed as part of the BRI. Since the pandemic hit, Beijing has also started to speak of a `Health Silk Road`. But with 20 per cent of BRI projects affected by Covid-related delays and financing constraints, Beijing may need to prioritise BRI projects over the coming years. This leaves countries like Pakistan with an opportunity to participate in both BRI and B3W in an optimal service of domestic needs.

Moreover, the fact that B3W is a G7 initiative, and not solely a US enterprise, also tempers dangers that a zero-sum mentality will dominate. B3W has its origins in a Trump administration plan to counter Chinese influence through a rival to BRI. It also had the dual goal of reducing US development expenditure by ramping up private sector investment. The initial focus was on hard infrastructure such as electricity projects.

But the idea has evolved under Biden, and will be further shaped by the inclusion ofother G7 countries with less polarised views of China.

Public statements emphasise that B3W is a `green BRP,implying a complementary rather than hostile track. Given that the EU has recently negotiated a trade agreement with China, and Italy, a G7 member, is a BRI participant, the either/or dimension is unlikely to materialise as bluntly as some are forecasting.

B3W may also create opportunities for regional integration, as both India and Afghanistan are likely to participate in some projects. This would be a welcome alternative to current projections, which see the Pakistan-India rivalry deepening in an echo of China-US tensions.

Key challenges will result from how B3W is structured. To work, the initiative will need to corral multiple governments and mobilise multiple sources of private capital, a slower and messier approach than BRPs bilaterally negotiated, largely state-funded projects. But post facto complications and renegotiations linked to many BRI projects may have increased appetite for better planned projects at the outset.

As always, the ultimate onus lies on Pakistan to map its needs, clarify its values and priorities, and participate in international initiatives so as to serve public needs.  The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.

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