**Diplomatic footprints**

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Barack Obama's eight years in the White House (2009-2016) were marked by more downs than ups in Pak-US relations. The year 2011, in particular, saw the lowest point in a once close alliance spanning decades.

To recap, the Raymond Davis affair involving an undercover US spy in the shooting of two young Pakistanis in Lahore, Osama bin Laden's elimination in a US airborne attack, and the killing of Pakistani soldiers at Salala represented serious setbacks to Pakistan's ties with the US while the war was raging in Afghanistan.

An atmosphere of mistrust prevailed as the US stepped up pressure on Pakistan to 'do more' to curtail Taliban attacks in Afghanistan, overlooking Pakistan's concerns and difficulties in a highly complex environment.

A new book, ‘Diplomatic Footprints’ written by Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, Pakistan's foreign secretary from 2013 to 2016 corresponding to the Obama administration's last three years provides a hair-raising account of extreme degradation in our relations with the US, as Washington's frustration grew over its failing coercive diplomacy towards Nawaz Sharif's government and the country's establishment.

Looking back at the state of Pak-US relations, Aizaz Chaudhry writes:

"During the three years that I was Foreign Secretary, our relations with the US followed the familiar pattern of a roller coaster ride, moving from highs to lows, rising and falling at sharp speeds, and taking turns in the most unpredictable ways...it chipped away advances made in the years following 9/11. By the time 2016 approached its midpoint, the relationship had plummeted to new lows, with the US teaming up with India and Afghanistan to put unprecedented pressure on Pakistan."

The book reveals details of meetings held by Aizaz Chaudhry with high-ranking American diplomats, demonstrating relentless pressure on Pakistan to further US interests, overlooking Pakistan's vital concerns. The author discloses, probably for the first time, how president Obama and vice-president Biden pursued the same hardline, generating heat in top-level meetings.

The writer does not hesitate to describe the deep malaise that had crept into relations with the US. According to him, the war in Afghanistan had led to great frustration for the Obama administration and it was actively exploring how to decisively end the war. "It held Pakistan partly responsible for not taking decisive action against the Taliban, and in particular against the Haqqani Network. Many incidents including the ones relating to Raymond Davis, the killing of Bin Laden, and Salala, were testaments to the difficulties in maintaining mutual trust in the fight against terrorism."

‘Diplomatic Footprints’ gives gripping excerpts from then-PM Nawaz Sharif's meeting with vice-president Biden on the sidelines of the UNGA in September, 2014. While the Pakistani side was advocating a broad-based partnership with funding for big ticket projects like the Basha and Dasu dams, Biden was focused on Pakistan going tough on the Afghan Taliban. Nawaz Sharif drew attention to Pakistan's enemies sheltered in Afghanistan, Biden suggested: let's be clear what we mean by terrorists. "Someone's enemy is someone's friend."

The ‘do more’ mantra was primarily aimed at Pakistan controlling the Taliban without taking into account the risks Pakistan ran. But that was not all as there was a steady stream of envoys pressing Islamabad to limit its nuclear and missile development. Again, there was little understanding of the threat to Pakistan from India's military build-up. All these themes would merge at the Obama-Nawaz meeting at the White House on October 22, 2015.

The writer has endeavoured to share valuable details of that meeting as it represented the essence of US policy toward Pakistan during Obama's presidency. There is no substitute for reading the author's memoirs. Some key points, however, are reproduced.

The American president sounded some concordant notes in his opening remarks, which were reciprocated by PM Sharif who briefed Obama on the progress achieved in dismantling the terrorist infrastructure, despite the huge human and financial costs and the blowback that accompanied Operation Zarb-e-Azb.

Obama responded that, according to president Ashraf Ghani, "stability would remain elusive unless safe havens of the Taliban were destroyed". Obama was particularly scathing about the capacities developed by the Haqqani Network to attack not only Afghanistan but also US bases. He asserted: "…Many of the HN operations were traced back to Pakistan".

Nawaz responded that the Taliban and Haqqani Network cadre was in Afghanistan and Pakistan did not allow them to use its soil to plan operations. Afghan soil was being used to launch attacks in Pakistan. We had evidence of the involvement of the Indian intelligence agency in Pakistan and assistance to the TTP.

While acknowledging Pakistan's legitimate security interests, Obama complained that it was difficult for him to explain to the US Congress that, while America continued to provide military equipment to Pakistan, the HN continued to attack US forces in Afghanistan, then returned to hideouts in Pakistan and maintained contacts within Pakistan. This phenomenon was eroding trust between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Nor did Obama miss the opportunity to raise by then the familiar US objections to our nuclear and missile programmes. He also referred to the militant outfits active against India, cautioning that the LeT's actions could trigger an India-Pakistan confrontation.

Nawaz briefed the US side on actions taken by the authorities against LeT and JuD. The tone of the meeting is aptly captured by the author, leaving the reader with the impression that while the US side was unrelenting in their demands, there was scant acknowledgment of Pakistan's actions or its genuine security concerns.

‘Diplomatic Footprints’ is a highly readable and enriching book for all those with a keen interest in the recent history of Pakistan's diplomatic efforts in a highly challenging and complex environment. It has chapters dedicated to Pakistan's relations with China, India, Jammu and Kashmir, Afghanistan, the Muslim world and several other topics including the author's fascinating personal story from childhood to a brilliant career in the country's foreign service. [The book has been published by Sang-e-Meel]

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