**The uneasy terrain of diplomacy**

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December 13, 2021

It was 1971; a PIA plane took off from Islamabad for Beijing with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on board. This historic sojourn led to a paradigm shift in the global balance of power while paving the way for normalisation of Sino-US relations. Subsequently, the world witnessed China aiding the US in winning the Cold War and the US assisting China in its opening-up policy after coming out of isolation. Kissinger has recently acknowledged Pakistan’s ‘key’ role in arranging his secret visit in making the breakthrough in Sino-US relations and acting as a go-between. The visit took place during a time when Islamabad was enjoying the trust of both Washington and Beijing.

Fast-forward to 2021. The question is: given the regional volatile situation, hostile international environment and dicey bilateral trajectories, could Pakistan play any role in diffusing tensions between China and the US? Notwithstanding Islamabad’s noble intentions to act as a mediator between the two most powerful nations of the world, a deeper look at the current state of affairs may come in handy to realise the plausibility of such a role.

[PM Imran to chair federal cabinet meeting today](https://nation.com.pk/14-Dec-2021/pm-imran-to-chair-federal-cabinet-meeting-today)

In the ongoing talk of a new Cold War and complexities of global governance, the US and China face complicated issues ranging from global economic growth to debt sustainability to debt trap narratives to environmental sustainability to China’s BRI and Digital Silk Road initiatives to exports of power plants to the debate over how the Covid-19 virus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan to the control of the South China Sea to Taiwan’s future to the massive trade war with China that started during the Trump administration to the Biden administration’s rallying around allies to counter China’s rise as a global economic power. Trump-era trade tariffs on China stay in place while the sensitive international sea lines continue to be patrolled to counter ‘China’s ulterior objectives’ particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. By inviting Taiwan in the Summit for Democracy, Washington has unequivocally spelled out the contours of future Sino-US relations. The statements emanating from Beijing are not-so-pleasing either. The US would ‘pay the price’ for boycotting Beijing Winter Olympics.

[Shehbaz Sharif bashes PTI govt over shortage of gas](https://nation.com.pk/14-Dec-2021/shehbaz-sharif-bashes-pti-govt-over-shortage-of-gas)

In which of these areas of red-hot conflicts, could a country like Pakistan possibly play a mediatory role? Unlike in 1971, there is neither any lack of communication between the US and China nor is there any dearth of means of communication. Just last month, President Biden and President Xi held a virtual meeting and discussed the ‘complex nature’ of bilateral relations. Does Islamabad enjoy Washington’s trust in 2021? Would China admit it could not handle the US generated pressure and hence Pakistan should play any mediatory role? Clearly, the answer to both questions is no. Furthermore, the results of Pakistan’s intended mediating role between Iran and Saudi Arabia and efforts of evolving a consensus at the OIC on Islamophobia may also be factored in. Playing a role in diffusing tensions between the US and China is perhaps a non-starter.

The discussion must move on to a more important issue. Is Islamabad presently pursuing a foreign policy that seeks Washington’s understanding on trade and economic matters, Pak-India relations, Kashmir, Afghanistan and regional stability while standing firmly on China’s side? The answer is yes.

[ADB approves $200mln loan for Punjab irrigation uplift](https://nation.com.pk/14-Dec-2021/adb-approves-dollar-200mln-loan-for-punjab-irrigation-uplift)

Followed by a solid ‘absolutely no’ to providing any bases to the US to monitor the emerging security situation in the region; a ‘polite no’ to attend the US-hosted recently held virtual Summit for Democracy to delicately ‘opposing’ Washington’s planned diplomatic boycott of 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, Pakistan has made its intentions known of pursuing a comparatively independent but pro-China foreign policy particularly in the context of regional geo-political affairs.

That does not mean Pakistan has closed all doors of diplomacy to America. While regretting to attend the Summit for Democracy, Islamabad has looked forward to ‘engaging’ with Washington at an ‘opportune time in the future’. A couple of days ago, PM Imran Khan has conveyed to the visiting four US legislatures from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Islamabad’s desire for Washington to play its due role in maintaining peace and stability in the region while reiterating the desire to expanding ties in all spheres particularly in the economic domain. Sadly, the US has consistently been refraining to positively respond on Pak-US economic and trade relations. Referring to the ambiguous term of ‘broad-based’ relations, the US seems to be interested only in intelligence sharing and counterterrorism. Obviously, Pakistan feels compelled to reflect on having other options.

[Three Lahore-bound flights diverted to Islamabad amid dense fog](https://nation.com.pk/14-Dec-2021/three-lahore-bound-flights-diverted-to-islamabad-amid-dense-fog)

In this backdrop, a pragmatic yet unapologetic foreign policy narrative is required. Not only Pakistan needs to visualise the immediate and distant repercussions of getting out of the West’s influence but also conceptualise the ways and means to sustain the regional approach to its foreign policy needs. In addition, Pakistan must also measure and address the involved risks that range from additional arm-twisting through political tools like FATF to irritating economic and trade sanctions to continued snubbing on Kashmir and Afghanistan. By now, Pakistan must also realise that in the regional context, India is considered more ‘useful’ than its western neighbour insofar as furthering US interests in the South Asian region is concerned.

The need of the hour for Pakistan is to display tenacity and to try creating equidistance between the US and China while staying within its politico-economic limits. No one is compelling Islamabad to take sides overtly. Neither is there any urgency to place its cards on the table of future global blocks right away. Considering that a whole year has passed by since a phone call from Washington was due, the ‘opportune time’ to discuss matters of mutual concern might well not be in sight until a dramatic turn is seen in the South Asian geo-political environment requiring Pakistan’s assistance. Perhaps, it was time to draw a sharp line between one’s national interests and world politics. Perhaps, it was time to focus on putting one’s own house in order in real terms rather than venturing into unknown troubled waters.

[Lahore remains on top of the most polluted cities’ list](https://nation.com.pk/14-Dec-2021/lahore-remains-on-top-of-the-most-polluted-cities-list)

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