**Delicate balancing act**

BY A I Z A Z A H M A D C H A U D H R Y 2022-02-22

A QUESTION is often being tossed around in policy discussions across the country: can Pakistan manage to balance its relations with the US and China? Let us first see why is this question being asked. The evolving geopolitics, particularly the US-China competition, is increasingly looking like a new Cold War.

If this competition intensifies further, there are growing concerns that the world might get divided into two camps, and sooner or later, the small and middle powers, might be called upon to make a choice to join either of the two camps.

Some analysts argue that Pakistan cannot maintain a balance in the two relationships, and instead should choose the Chinese camp right away. Their contention is that the US was an unreliable partner whereas China was a time-tested friend. Further, the US has already chosen India as its preferred strategic partner in South Asia to counterbalance China, while Pakistan was being subjected to America`s diplomatic pressures and economic coercion.

There are two assumptions in this line of argument: one that two camps have already been formed and Pakistan belongs to the Chinese camp. The second assumption is that once Pakistan is in the Chinese camp, it would be better positioned toface the strategiccoercionofthe US in the diplomatic, political and economic domains.

Both assumptions, on deeper reflection, do not seem valid. First the world is not likely to get divided into camps the way it was during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. The US and China are far more dependent on each other than the US and the Soviet Union were.

The US-China bilateral trade, for instance, exceeded $650 billion in 2021.

China holds over $1 trillion in US securities. Many of America`s friends in Europe, the Gulf, and even in East Asia maintain close economic ties with China and are reluctant to view their relations with the two superpowers as a zero-sum game. No country wants to give up one relationship for the other. Interstate relations these days are guided by the mutuality of interests and issue-based alliances. It is quite possible for any two countries to be allies on one issue and rivals on the other.

China is no doubt a reliable friend of Pakistan. It has always respected Pakistan`s sovereignty and supported us at international forums. China invested billions in our economy when no other country was willing to do so. However, that does not mean we should expect China to pick up the consequences of ourmishandling of the economy and politics.

In fact, the messaging from China has been to strive for a peaceful coexistence with India and friendly relations with the US, so that Pakistan can increase space for its economic development. In short, China would want us to keep a balance in our relations with China and the US.

Here, the balance does not mean equality or equal distance. It simply means to let every relationship serve your national interests.

Pakistan has enjoyed sustained periods of close engagement with the US. Right after independence, when Pakistan faced an existential threat from India, our leadership found it useful to become an ally of the US to bolster our military capabilities and uplift agriculture and economy. Ever since, thousands of Pakistani students went to the US for higher education. More than a million Pakistanis have made the US their home. The US remains the largest destination of our exports. For decades, the balance of our trade with the UShas been in our favour.

US companies have had a consistent presence in Pakistan.

So, it makes sense for Pakistan to maintain close relations with both, China and the US.

If we were to choose one against the other, there would be huge costs because of our economic vulnerabilities andfractious polity. Admittedly, the balancing act will be difficult, be it the US-led Democracy Summit or the Winter Olympics hosted by China. However, as longas Pakistanis taking decisions based on its national interest, China and the US will both show understanding. Every country is entitled to pursue its own national interests, and so are we. The UAE and some other Arab countries chose to establish relations with Israel because they felt it was in their national interest. Israel is a close ally of the US, but it maintains strong economic ties with China. India, despite being a US ally, has not lowered its traditionally strong relations with Russia. Pakistan, must, therefore, maintain good relations with both China and the US, no matter how delicate this balancing act may appear to be. Not maintaining a balance and creating an enemy out of one or the other could be costlyforPakistan.m The writer is former foreign secretary and author of Diplomatic Footprints.