[**Time to make clear choices**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631749/time-to-make-clear-choices)

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THE [deadline for US forces’ withdrawal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1618063) from Afghanistan is approaching, and major international stakeholders are looking towards Pakistan to play a leading but voluntary role in bringing stability to its neighbourhood with the US particularly expecting a lot from the country in terms of short-term mutual interests.

Apparently, Pakistan wants a much longer partnership and restoration of the strategic cooperation between the two countries. Though nothing can be ruled out, at this point Washington’s strategic priorities in the region appear to have changed. This is not the Cold War era, where conducive political and ideological environments had brought the two countries closer. Nor is the situation like it was after the events of 9/11, when Pakistan abandoned its weak allies in Afghanistan.

The current scenario is different, and in this changed environment the political and strategic priorities of the US revolve around confronting China or dealing with Iran’s challenge in the Middle East. Pakistan cannot even think of undermining its friendship with China and cannot play a dominant role in any coercive policy against Iran. Prime Minister Imran Khan’s [recent op-ed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630842) published in the *Washington Post* said that the interests of Pakistan and the US in Afghanistan were the same, but shared interests in a country that is fast drifting into another phase of chaos cannot become the sole reason for a long-term strategic partnership between Islamabad and Washington.

Who could be more concerned about instability in Afghanistan than its neighbours Pakistan and China?

Where the US is concerned, the Afghan Taliban cannot pose any threat to its internal security or global interests. Al Qaeda has weakened and undergone certain changes, with the result that it now focuses more on the ‘near enemy’, or the Muslim states, as described by its ideologues.

The Afghan leadership also believes that the Taliban and Al Qaeda factor can force the US to review its decision to withdraw its troops from the country. The Ashraf Ghani-led delegation is in Washington in a [last-ditch effort](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631517/biden-meets-afghan-leaders-assures-kabul-of-sustained-help) to delay or slow down the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan on the grounds of their perception of the threat. US economic and security cooperation is crucial for Afghanistan, and it can make a commitment to the transitional phase, which has already been pledged.

Many strategic thinkers in Islamabad still believe that Pakistan can extract its strategic and geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, and it can repair its relations with the West. Perhaps, the heart of the Pakistani power elite is still with the West, but its mind is divided between the latter and China.

Who could be more concerned about instability in Afghanistan than its neighbours Pakistan and China? Such an environment would hurt their security and geoeconomic and political interests. The scenario was in sight long before the decision to withdraw the US troops was made; it was clear that if foreign troops left Afghanistan without defeating the Taliban decisively, stability in the war-torn country would not be possible, and the chances of a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and other stakeholders would difficult, and that external support, including from Pakistan, would be needed.

**Read |** [*US pullout deadline diminished Islamabad’s leverage: PM Imran*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631495)

Almost all the assessments had indicated that without a negotiated settlement, the Taliban’s power would grow and other local and international terrorist groups too would become more influential. Likewise, it was foreseen that relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan would deteriorate, triggering strategic animosity between the two nations.

The current discourse indicates Islamabad lacks clarity about its strategic priorities, and many in the policy corridors believe that [providing bases to the US in Pakistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630278) can help restore Washington’s confidence in Pakistan. Though Prime Minister Imran Khan has categorically declared that his government will not provide any bases to the US forces for any purpose, many think this is an attempt to increase Islamabad’s bargaining power, partly by allowing the opposition to build pressure on the government which has a thin majority in parliament. The view in Washington about the Pakistani power elite is also negative and it is perceived that with Pakistan desperate for US cooperation, the US is in a position to get Pakistan to agree to the former’s terms of cooperation. Many see the same logic behind President Joe Biden’s reluctance to contact Prime Minister Khan directly.

**Read |** [*'US couldn’t win the war from inside Afghanistan after 20 years — how would it do it from bases in Pakistan?'*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630842)

China is closely observing the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The growing instability in Afghanistan is a nightmare for Beijing as it conceives that it can seriously affect China’s internal security, hinder the Belt and Road Initiative and increase uncertainty in its neighbourhood. Had the US and Pakistan been able to establish peace in Afghanistan, it would have been a great relief for China because in that case China would only have to contribute more politically, despite its apprehensions about the US bases in Pakistan.

Alternatively, China will have to play a lead role by invoking multiple channels — bilateral and multilateral — engaging not only Afghanistan and Pakistan but also other regional countries like Russia and the Central Asian nations, in addition to focusing on the Shanghai Organisation Cooperation, where India is an important member.

These are testing times for the Pakistani leadership that must make clear choices, either going with the US or China both of which expect Pakistan to facilitate the peace process among the Afghans. Almost everyone believes Pakistan can influence the Taliban, notwithstanding the complications involved in the relationship. Following the Doha deal, the Taliban’s confidence has grown and they have become more assertive. Their [recent military triumphs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631316/fear-stalks-kunduz-as-taliban-lay-siege) in Afghanistan have further boosted their morale. Their growing power will decrease Pakistan’s influence over them, and Pakistan will have to make some immediate decisions and clearly choose a side. Otherwise, it will walk on a tightrope trying to balance its relations with other players.

No doubt, Pakistan and China have many political and strategic convergences, but both need to develop a certain level of mutual trust where the two feel comfortable about each other’s international and regional engagements.

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