

Pakistan-US relations: controversial yet robust

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With the departure of two key US interlocutors, Secretary of State Colin Powell and his Deputy Richard Armitage, the present course of Pakistan-US relationship will not alter. With their departure some change in style but not in the substance of US engagement with Pakistan may occur. After all, with George Bush having been re-elected, the White House policy they were implementing remains unchanged. Washington's Pakistan policy under Bush, in its scope and gradual expansion, surpasses that of the fifties era. Then it was a more narrowly based defence-dominated relationship compared to the present broad-based relationship which covers defence, social sector, trade, economy and political ideology. Evolving against the backdrop of an aggressive unilateralist US foreign policy responsible for the death of thousands of innocent Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, this relationship is under unprecedented criticism within Pakistan. Yet for its structure and substance, this relationship is also more robust than that of the fifties. While it may remain the target of major incidents of sabotage and violence, part a reaction to an ill-conceived war on terrorism and part a reaction to internal power struggles, the growth of this relationship is irrevocable.

In the post 9/11 period Pakistan-US relations have expanded in direct correlation to Washington's growing realisation that counter-terrorism requires more than just carpet bombing, al-Qaeda killings and Guantanamo Bay-like human rights abuses, that social economic development of societies is also a necessary component of anti-terrorism. To a lesser extent, Washington also realises that resolution of conflicts also contributes to condition of peace and security. Moving forward on these various fronts, Pakistan has become Washington's key ally. Given that Pakistan has a crucial link to most global issues ranging from WMD, nuclear proliferation, counter terrorism, political extremism, clash of civilisation, success of rebuilding Afghanistan and crucial trade communications in Asia, the United States has no option but to engage with Pakistan holistically.

Also Pakistan's geographical location links it to four different regions — South Asia, South West Asia, China and Central Asia — making it the swivel around which matters of trade, security, politics and economy revolve. The effect of the United States proxy war against the Soviet Union clearly demonstrated the pivotal character of Pakistan. By virtue of its location Pakistan has the inherent strength to influence security, trade and commerce, ideology and social state of all the four regions that surround it. As the hub of an open-ended United States proxy war, politico-economic instability and insecurity trickled to its surrounding areas. The United States policy of using Islamic sen-



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timent and teachings in the *Madrasahs*, by injecting kalashnikov and guerrilla training-backed intense hatred against the 'evil Communist occupiers of an Islamic state' was not to remain restricted to the Afghan proxy war theatre. Some by design and some by the logic of unintended consequences, this weaponised and religiously-framed hatred spread in the four regions to undermine security and stability.

Unresolved conflicts like Kashmir, the ongoing Pakistan-India cold war, the restive situation in Sinkiang and the subsequent problems in Chechnya combined with the lingering tragedy of Palestine all provided a conducive environment for the spread of this weaponised hatred.

Significantly, the Pakistan-US cooperation of the eighties established two facts. One, that a force-led and hatred-fed approach to national security could devastatingly undermine security. Two, it reinforced Pakistan's role as a potent pivotal state. It was not until the tragedy of 9/11 that the United States fully recognised these two facts. 9/11 demonstrated that the tentacles of US patronised 'weaponised hatred' of a people who felt violated against the backdrop of US' Arab and Palestine policy, could hit its original mentor. Similarly, the significance of Pakistan as a key partner for the rollback of this negative phenomenon was also fully acknowledged.

Washington's consciousness after 9/11 has been partial if not contradictory. While it subscribes to Pakistan's view that unresolved conflicts trigger terrorism, it opted to invade Iraq thereby again resorting to use of unadulterated force as opposed to force-backed dialogue as a dispute settler. Pakistan has parted ways with the US where necessary. For example on Iraq. Islamabad also calls for cross-civilisational dialogue and criticises, even if in a muted manner, the excesses against Pakistani-Americans and Guantanamo Bay prisoners. Overriding all this is Pakistan's policy to enter into an active security and development partnership with the United States.

At present there are ministerial level bilateral structures like the Defence Consultative group, working group on counter-terrorism and Law Enforcement, Joint Economic Forum, Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). These are institutionalised efforts to ensure continuity to expand the relationship in these areas. Anti-terrorism, security linkages, broad liberalism and social development constitute the substance of this relationship. There is coopera-

tion in Afghanistan, Pakistan-India relations, WMD and nuclear non-proliferation. The three billion dollars multi-year aid package is a manifestation of this cooperation; one which would continue irrespective of a Republican or Democratic administration in the White House. Similarly, the Non-Nato Ally Status was given to Pakistan by Washington, recognising its strategic significance. However, with Bush back in office and Republican control over the Congress and Senate, Pakistan-US relationship will inevitably be strengthened in the coming years. Any questions of policy change towards Pakistan are misplaced. The logic of the post 9/11 re-engagement with Pakistan still holds.

In Pakistan, the criticism of United States policy toward Pakistan hinges on two elements: one, that it ignores the need for genuine democracy and two that to please Washington, the government of Pakistan hounds innocent Pakistanis in Wana and beyond, on the false pretext of rounding terrorists. On the question of United States and democracy in Pakistan while it is true that United States policy toward Pakistan in key period of fifties, eighties and at present has provided the enabling environment for military's extra-constitutional role, to expect anything but expediency from Washington in pursuing what it considers its national interest, would be naive. The issue of military in Pakistan's power structure will have to be resolved by forces within Pakistan. As for anti-terrorism operations targeting innocents in Pakistan, this verily reflects the government's failure to frame the policy in need-based home-grown discourse. How often have we heard top officials telling us that this effort is necessary so that when mothers send their kids to school, there are sure that they will return alive, that when believers go to the mosques, *imambaragahs*, churches and temples they too would be secure? Instead, the government often appropriates the language of the 'other' to explain that the battle is against "religious extremism," "Islamic militancy" and the "Jihadi fighters." These "Jihadis" after all are the second generation offspring of the internationally-funded proxy war of the eighties. It is a difficult rollback for the Pakistani state which often clumsily handles the projection of its anti-terrorism policy.

Meanwhile, Pakistan-US relations are likely to remain on track. Washington cannot pursue its global security agenda without Pakistan. For Pakistan's socio-economic and security interests, the relationship conducted with skill and dignity is equally important. Pakistan's reform and reconstruction and its relations with Washington are significantly inter-linked. However, the extent to which Pakistan can benefit from this relationship will depend on Pakistan's internal political stability and on the reform of its state institutions.