**Resolving conflict**

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Tuesday, Feb 01, 2022

Amid the US-China tussle, Pakistan has maintained an impartial stance, wisely balancing its relations with the two. It stresses a non-partisan approach as it wants to refrain from joining any political bloc. This approach is influenced by a shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world, which has given countries greater flexibility.

This shift in the global environment has, on the one hand, allowed countries to follow their national interest, while on the other, increased complexities which have proven to be difficult for states to navigate through.

One of these is the growing competition and rivalry between the two major powers – the US and China – that has impacted the whole world. Many countries are anxious about the moment this rivalry reaches a point where they might be forced to choose one between the two. The notion also troubles Pakistan.

For the country, affable relations with both the US and China are vital, and it cannot neglect one at the cost of the other, given how its geopolitical strategy now includes geo-economics. China is playing a strategic role in elevating the status of Pakistan’s geo-economic strategy through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The US has also been one of the country’s top investors over the last two decades and is a major non-Nato ally as well. Pakistan needs, and wants, to have a mutually beneficial working relationship with both countries to avoid having to choose or being cajoled into choosing between the two.

To dial down tensions between the US and China, Pakistan can play a constructive role. The prime minister echoed the same during his speech in December 2021 where he said that Pakistan wishes to play its role in bridging the gap between the two global powers. Pakistan, on many previous occasions, has served as a bridge between the two states and its efforts were acknowledged, which shows that there is a history and an element of trust that can be built upon.

In the 1970s, Pakistan played a crucial role in resolving the differences between the US and China. This effort was recognised by former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger when Pakistan played a key role in arranging his secret visit from Islamabad to Beijing. Later, Islamabad committed itself to playing a constructive role in de-escalating tensions between the US under President Trump and Iran. For this purpose, Prime Minister Imran Khan also offered to meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in an attempt to mediate. He also met with Saudi leaders on behalf of the US.

Pakistan has unique ties with all three sides and is making these efforts to promote regional peace and stability. The country also helped in negotiations with the Taliban and acted as a facilitator in the Afghan peace process. Washington’s collaboration with Islamabad saw positive outcomes that resulted in the intra-Afghan dialogue and the US-Taliban peace deal.

Pakistan can continue such efforts to support and assist in improving relations between the US and China. In December 2021, the OIC meeting – held in Islamabad – managed to bring the US and China to the table on the matter of Afghanistan. The two states, deliberating on a matter that impacts both of them, provides a suitable start for a smoother relationship. The US-China participation at the OIC meeting shows that the two are on a relatively similar page when it comes to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

It also shows that, despite the ongoing tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, trade/tech wars, opposition to the winter Olympics by the US, and opposition to the Summit of Democracy by China, they have some convergence of interest. And this is where Pakistan can play a crucial role in further finding areas where the two can cooperate.

The Chinese and US governments are also making internal efforts to slow down the downward spiral of their relations. For example, despite their trade war, the November 2021 Biden-Xi virtual meeting stressed measures which can ensure that their competition does not veer into conflict. Similarly, despite mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific, efforts towards confidence-building measures (CBMs) could be witnessed during the virtual meeting between the US Indo-Pacific Command Navy and Air Force and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s navy and air forces that deliberated on safe operations and efforts to reduce risks in the air and sea. Likewise, Chinese Foreign Minister Wag Yi stressed, during a speech, that while Beijing does not fear confrontation with Washington, it would welcome cooperation and ‘positive’ competition.

This shows that despite tensions, there are efforts by both sides to avoid steering their relations into a conflict, and most importantly, there’s a willingness to have a functional relationship. This could indicate that they are out of the precarious phase and at the beginning of a new constructive one.

In this phase, Pakistan can play a facilitating role by providing an open channel of communication so that their trade/tech wars do not run into an escalatory mood. This open communication can, more importantly, assist the two sides in keeping tensions in the Asia-Pacific at bay, leading to productive talks on global issues such as climate change, the pandemic, geo-economics, and strategic stability that affect all nations. The purpose of this effort by Pakistan would be to work on developing peace and stability in not only the region but also the world.

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