**The gathering storm**

BY J A V I D H US A I N 2021-09-24

PAKISTAN is at a critical juncture once again. The gathering storm of its daunting internal and external challenges demands political sagacity of the highest order to ensure stability, security and economic progress.

The growing US-China rivalry has transformed the geopolitical scene, in particular the Asian strategic landscape. In pursuance of its policy to contain China, the US has strengthened its strategic alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia, reinforced the quasi-alliance with Japan, India and Australia called Quad, strengthened the strategic partnership with India, and, more recently, signed an agreement together with the UK to sell nuclear-powered submarine technology to Australia under the umbrella of AUKUS to stiffen Australia`s back in resisting the expansion of China`s power and influence.

The US pressure on its friends to cancel agreements to acquire 5G wireless network technology f rom Huawei, the leading Chinese firm in this field, is part of its efforts to undermine the expansion of China`s strategic and economic influence abroad. It was for the same purpose that a campaign was launched by the US and its proxies in Pakistan to malign China and undermine CPEC soon after its initiation in April 2015 when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Pakistan.

The power imbalance in South Asia caused by the rapidly developing Indo-US p artner ship leaves Pakistan with no choice but to build up its own strategic, political and economic cooperation with China and develop ties with Russia. Against this background, recent reports of China`s unhappiness over the slowing down of CPEC projects during the past three years, filtering out of the hearings in the Senate and from other sources, are worrisome. In view of the critical importance of CPEC to Pakistan`s economic progress, the government must speed up the implementation of the various projects undertaken under the CPEC umbrella.

The strengthening of Pakistan`s links with China is unlikely to be welcomed by the US. Islamabad, therefore, should be prepared for growing US pressure for it to change course. The American debacle in Afghanistan resulting in the victory of the Taliban is generating additional US pressure on Pakistan. The US failed in Afghanistan because for a long time after the fall of the previous Taliban government it sought a military rather than a political settlement, forced a government of its own choice on the Afghans and alienated the Pakhtuns instead of forming an inclusive government (something it isdemanding after the Taliban victory), and imposed Western values on the conservative, religious and tribal Afghan society.

Unfortunately, the US military and political leadership appears to lack the courage to tell their people that they themselves are primarily responsible for the Afghan fiasco. It is more convenient to put the whole blame on Pakistan. It is not surprising therefore that Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a recent statement accused Pakistan of double dealing in Afghanistan and threatened a reassessment of America`s relations with this country. So the road ahead for Pakistan-US relations is strewn with obstacles.

The Taliban victory in Afghanistan itself poses serious foreign policy challenges for Pakistan if the Taliban fail to broaden the base of their government.

Besides, there is the risk of Afghanistan`s neighbours getting sucked into the crisis.

The situation calls for appropriate diplomatic initiatives by Pakistan vis-à-vis theTaliban and Afghanistan`s neighboursforthe restoration of durable peace and stability. India, which never misses a chance to undermine Pakistan`s security and economic well-being, will be ever ready to fish in troubled waters in case thesituation in Afghanistan takes a turn for the worse. This is over and above the threat to Pakistan directly posed by India because of its aggressive moves in occupied Kashmir and its hegemonic ambitions in the region.

A politically stable and economically strong Pakistan is a must if the government is to overcome the external challenges confronting it. Unfortunately, the lack of wisdom shown by the present government over the past three years has further destabilised the country politically and weakened it economically. The combination of external challenges and internal vulnerabilities can do much damage to Pakistan`s well-being in all respects. The need of the hour is stability in the country through respect for the Constitution and economic progress through structural reforms. The writer is a retired ambassador, an author, and president of the Lahore Council for World Affairs.

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