**Afghanistan Counterterrorism Act 2021: Implications for US-Pakistan Relations**

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With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of August 2021 ended the US-Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan that lasted for two decades. Despite huge losses borne by Pakistan in war on terror since the US invasion of Afghanistan, Washington is not happy with Islamabad over the precarious situation and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. As in the past, US-Pakistan post-9/11 relations are also bumpy. Pakistan is putting forward its efforts and cooperation and loses caused in war on terror while the US accuses the former of supporting the Taliban.

It is clear now and Washington has acknowledged that it lost the war in Afghanistan. However, it is now in search of factors that caused the defeat in Afghanistan. At the end of last month, twenty-two Republican senators moved a bill in the US Senate named: ‘Afghanistan Counterterrorism, Oversight, and Accountability Act’. The bill calls for an assessment of the US campaign in Afghanistan, and also sanctioning the Taliban and those who assisted them.

It seeks to ban Taliban representatives from membership of United Nations General Assembly or any other world body. However, the bill carries critical clauses for Islamabad which experts believe can be sanctioned, if substantial evidence is provided. This article seeks to analyze how this bill if passed and enacted can impact the future course of US-Pakistan relationship.

If the US sanctions Pakistan, it will affect the future course of US-Pakistan relations and will embolden Islamabad to go for other options than Washington.

The main elements that bring US-Pakistan relations to its lowest ebb is trust deficit between both the states. Though US-Pakistan relationship started with cordial exchanges between both states yet the first factor that affected it was the Indian factor. Washington’s tilt towards New Delhi angered Islamabad and the perception that US follows only its own interests while ignoring Pakistan took root and it still exists. Pakistan remained a close ally in the Cold War and during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. However, whenever the US interests were served, it turned its back to Pakistan.

When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Washington imposed the Pressler Amendment Act that provided for sanctions on Pakistan. Islamabad took this development as a great betrayal by Washington since it was its ally in defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, following the September 11 attacks on the US mainland, it needed Pakistan to invade Afghanistan to bring the culprits of 9/11 to justice. This time too, Pakistan fully cooperated with the US and provided them with logistic and intelligence support. Pakistan arrested a handful of Al-Qaeda terrorists and handed them over to US authorities. However, the ‘do more’ mantra did exist in the post-9/11 US-Pakistan affairs and Washington continued its carrots and stick policy.

Still, Pakistan helped the US at every stage, even during the talks that led to the end of the war. However, the recent bill in the US Senate reminds us of the Pressler Amendment. Nonetheless, the current situation is quite different from that of the 1990s. There is multi polarity in the global order. There is the rise of China and Russia that challenges US hegemony. China at the moment is ready to fill the gap that the US has left in Afghanistan. The Chinese political and economic aid to the Taliban is an indication that they may likely fill the gap.

Though the bill will still be discussed and it will take time however, it has impacted US-Pakistan relations and also widens the trust deficit that already exists. The Pressler Amendment was enacted but was conditioned on evaluation by the president on a yearly basis. On the one hand, experts see this bill as a result of differences between Democrats and Republicans while on the other, some see it as a source of pressure on Pakistan, the Taliban and even other countries close to the Taliban like Russia and China. If the US sanctions Pakistan or pressurizes it, it will affect the future course of US-Pakistan relations and will embolden Islamabad to go for other options than Washington. Similarly, it can further bring Pakistan close to China and Russia.

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