**US Pak relations in Biden era**

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I remember playing weekend cricket in Abbottabad as a kid. One of our playmates used to walk off with the wickets if he got out. A spoiler who could not accept defeat. President Trump reminds me of him. Despite putting up a strong resistance and getting more votes than 2016 he could not get to the podium as #1. Rather than gracefully concede like most Presidents in the past, Trump is headed for the trenches.

He is born in a wrong country where institutions are stronger than individuals. If Trump was in a third world country where leaders become cults, he would have lasted for life. His autocratic style brooking no opposition would have portrayed him as a strong man. He would have flourished and played out his innings with glee. His team in USA is still intact. William Barr in Justice, Mike Pompeo in State, Senate leader Mitch McConnell and other Republicans are circling their wagons to put up all kinds of resistance.

The system is being severely tested, but I see Joe Biden being sworn in as the 46th President on 20th January 2021. Despite witnessing normalcy in a meltdown these days, Trump support is slowly peeling off. Life has to go on and the real challenges within US have to be confronted. Daily COVID infections are at their highest levels ever, the economy is faltering, racial tensions are simmering and environment is haywire. The new administration pretty much has its plate full.

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President Elect Joe Biden is no novice to the international scene. His prolonged stint in Senate and two terms as Vice President have given him an insider’s view. Post elections there has been a flood of commentaries about his past record and the likely scenarios in a Biden-Harris Administration. He is portrayed as the hatchet man for Obama administrations. Doubts are floating about Kamala Harris’s Indian lineage which will tilt US towards Modi.

For domestic consumption in Pakistan the rumor mills are working overtime about Sharif family’s access to Biden. An impression is being created that PML(N)’s fortunes are about to be revived. Maryam Nawaz is equating Trump’s departure as a precursor to Prime Minister Imran Khan’s exit. Upon reaching Lahore it is interesting to see conspiracy theorists are alive, well and flourishing. I would not like it to change; it will take spice out of our lives!

What are the factors that will play a role in future Pak-US relations? First, the unpredictability of Trump era will fade away. His penchant for dictators will be replaced by rebuilding relations with traditional US allies. European leaders were quick to congratulate Biden. Four years of Trump have made serious dents into unified positions of USA with its European allies. NATO alliance will be revived. The wimpy approach with President Putin at the cost of Europe will end. Details of Donald Trump’s subservience to Putin will emerge.

President Elect Joe Biden is moving quickly despite Trump’s shenanigans. He has announced his team to combat COVID and conveyed US intent to rejoin the Paris environmental accord. The coming weeks will be turbulent led by a lame duck President. Upon completion of votes recount the air will start to clear up. Changes will be minor and Biden’s victory will stand. Legal challenges may not amount to much unless the Supreme Court intervenes. That will be a whole new ball game, but it is not likely.

It is expected that USA will re-occupy its seat as one of the global leaders, a role abandoned by Trump. The theatres that impact Pakistan are Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, India and Kashmir. Pakistan does not feature in Sino-US relations.

The coziness of Trump and MBS will be tempered down and Jamal Khashoggi’s murder will no longer be ignored. The unfettered support of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will see some re-adjustments. Plight of Palestinians may start getting more attention.

While revival of Iran’s nuclear deal framework agreement may take time, the red hot tensions between US and Iran may see some rationalization. This flashpoint in Middle East should subside.

USA-India relationship shall be driven by self interest of both nations. However Prime Minister Modi’s record on treatment of minorities is likely to emerge from the darkness it is confined to. Joe Biden had a central role in US-Afghan relations in Obama’s tenures. He understands this theatre well. He is a realist and one hopes he will continue the path of reconciliation. This trillion-dollar no-win war needs to conclude without further bloodletting.

Pakistan-US relations have a long history with all its ups and downs. The strategic relationship involving security and economic ties have endured despite steep differences from time to time. Kashmir is one of the central planks of our foreign policy. It maybe time to revisit the arguments we present.

Pakistan has stuck to its principled stand seeking Kashmiri’s legal rights to a plebiscite for seventy plus years. We have to refocus and present it as flagrant violations of human rights highlighting the atrocities and mayhem of occupying forces. The democrats may respond better than Trump’s false assurances of mediation.

On the domestic scene PML(N) maybe rejoicing prematurely like they did on the formation of JIT in Panama cases. Joe Biden got elected on a platform of justice, equality and ending corruption. How likely is it that he will support re-instating the most corrupt regime based on lobbying?

Pakistan must re-double its efforts to work with incoming administration. Many Pakistani Americans have ties to the democrats. PM IK must reach out to his supporters but for that he needs a competent team, unfortunately a missing component of PTI regime.

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