**Doctrine, policy, and strategy US Presidential Elections – policy change towards Pakistan?**

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Deep polarisation is a phrase that is used loosely nowadays but if anything can describe the current status of politics in the US, it would be this! Trump’s four years in office have been nothing but turbulent. During this time, a country that was once looked upon as the leader of the free world is now seen as an inward looking, nationalistic state. Though, this speaks to only half the population with the other half still striving for global engagement and internationalism – thus the deep polarisation!

While the US electorate doesn’t have much on offer in terms of presidential candidates, it still holds the precarious balance in putting either Donald Trump or Joe Biden into office. Polls have suggested that Biden leads Trump in many areas but these are just polls, whose predictions should be taken with a pinch of salt! Whatever happens on November the 3rd, the question is this – whether a change of guard in the White House will mean a policy change towards Pakistan? The answer is that barring a few variations, the status quo will largely prevail. Here is why.

A historic comparison between Republicans and Democrats is quite illuminating. Republicans are generally conservative, right off centre, strong on religion and defence, nationalist more than internationalist, less concerned about environment and human rights and protectionist in nature. Democrats are generally liberal, left off centre, not highly focused on religion and defence, support internationalism at the cost of nationalism, acutely worried about environment and human rights and believe in freer trade. Although these lines are blurred quite a bit in modern times with everyone trying to take the middle ground but some ideals still are strikingly different between the right and the left. For Pakistan specifically, the past suggests that Republican administrations have been more beneficial than Democratic governments. Nevertheless – even if Joe Biden wins the White House, he will have to continue much of the Republican foreign policy towards Pakistan.

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The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will continue a pace and Biden will still need Pakistan’s support in getting the process completed before it is derailed by any further acts of subversion. While there may be a greater focus on a couple of Democratic pet peeves – human rights issues and eradicating remnants of militant organisations – both will somewhat be sacrificed at the altar of needing Pakistani support for exiting Afghanistan. For the reason that the Pakistan armed forces continue to play a major role in advancing the peace process in Afghanistan and have used their influence on the Taliban leadership to engage and show flexibility so that the withdrawal can complete and lead to sustainable peace in Afghanistan. The recent presence of GulbedinHekmatyar and Mullah Baradar in Pakistan bears testimony to that fact and that Pakistan espouses an amicable Afghanistan and will support any US administration to reach that goal.

The Trump White House plan to permanently keep approximately 5,000 ground troops along with intelligence operatives in Afghanistan – to mostly monitor Pakistan and Iran especially when it comes to their nuclear capability – will be maintained even by a Biden White House. This is mostly because of the constant albeit incorrect narrative built in the US by main stream media and also because Biden has routinely criticised Pakistan over its nuclear program. Why would he let a chance go by to put Pakistan under constant pressure over its nuclear arsenal? Nevertheless, and continuing from the past, Pakistan has been acutely awareof US designs and takes all realistic and appropriate measures to ensure the integrity and safety of its nuclear and military establishments – and will continue to do so.

The US-China conflict will be something that Biden would want to deescalate but it will be nearly impossible because of the hyped up Chinese narrative built by the Trump administration over the last four years. From Coronavirus to economic stagnation, it seems that Trump thinks China as the main culprit behind all of the world’s ills! Hence, Biden will continue to sabre rattle with China. This would mean that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will also continue to find stiff opposition from the Biden administration especially as the US sees its hegemony constantly challenged by an emerging super power in the form of China. Consequently, Biden will further advance friendly overtures towards India that were accelerated in the time of Trump. That is a major reason that despite some critical statements, mostly from the Democratic nominee for Vice President Kamala Harris, on the Indian government’s actions in Kashmir, the Biden White House is unlikely to take any further and tougher action against the Modi government. Democratic ideals of global human freedoms notwithstanding – and that is a big concession! – India’s strategic role in the US calculus will triumph over any concerns Biden may have about the flouting of Kashmiri rights! All this will further ensure Pakistan’s even closer alliance with China. To minimise that and keeping the strategic nature of South East Asia in focus, Biden will do what Trump has done – take proactive steps to act as an arbitrator between India and Pakistan.

For US-Pakistan relationship, people to people engagement suffered under Trump in a variety of ways. It was perhaps most heavily felt in the area of tightening visa and travel requirements and restricting admission of foreign students in American universities. Joe Biden, wary of the declining economy and the continued presence of Coronavirus, will not be able to ease or reverse these isolationist tendencies even if his Democratic heart is set on it! Similarly, and for the same reasons, the Biden While House will only be able to do so much to get back into the global engagement game and revitalise institutions such as UN, UNSC, WTO and NATO. Trump’s nationalistic slogan of ‘America First’ and ‘Make America Great Again’ will take time to neutralise!

In conclusion, a change of guard at the White House will not mean any substantial change of fortunes for Pakistan. Pakistan will maintain a strategic position in the region albeit being wary of fluctuating US designs. Its place in any future security setup in a post Trump era will be as relevant and as important as it is today and cannot be ignored at the expense of other regional policy goals. Especially as Pakistan may yet again prove a powerful ally to the US with respect to building bridges with Iran or mending fences with China! It only goes to show the consistent geo-strategic importance Pakistan maintains in the annals of global power calculations. It seems that the French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr was right – “the more things change, the more they stay the same”!

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