**Ironies of a no-win war**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-03-29

SEVERAL books have been written on Pakistan-US relations. But few have explored the connection between domestic political developments and American foreign policy and the way Pakistan`s internal politics was at times influenced by geopolitical shif ts in the region. Zahid Hussain`s latest book does just that. Titled No-WinWarit examines the ups and downs of Pakistan-US ties in the context of their of ten divergent post-9/11 views and strategies in Afghanistan. This completes the author`s trilogy his first book Frontline Pakistan and second, The Scorpion`s Tail, offered wellresearched accounts of Pakistan`s policy dilemmas in the wake of 9/11 and the country`s battle against militant groups.

His new book shines a light on the many paradoxes that characterised Pakistan-US ties in the shadow of the Afghan war that followed the US invasion in 2001. Zahid focuses on the contradictions of post-9/11 relations. But this relationship has always been mercurial through many phases. From the alliance forged during the Cold War to the phase after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and then the frontline role Pakistan was thrust into after 9/11, closer relations usually evolved in response to global or regional geopolitical storms. They were thus principally a function of factors extraneous to bilateral ones. Once the storms subsided the relationship was downgraded as US strategic priorities shif ted.

The roller coaster nature of the relationship has long been evident. Ties have swung in a cyclical pattern between close engagement and deep estrangement, interspersed by periods of benign disengagement. Dubbed during the Cold War as the `most allied ally of the US`, Pakistan became America`s most sanctioned `friend` in the 1990`s after the Russian occupation of Afghanistan was rolled back as a result of Pak-US cooperation.

Even at times of close collaboration there was often an elephant in the room. It was India during many phases. For Pakistan ties with the US were part of its external balancing strategy to address its security dilemma given its power asymmetry with a hostile India. This involved the pursuit of extraregional support to mitigate the imbalance but usually left Pakistan disappointed with Washington in thetriangular Pakistan-US-India relationship.

Pakistan`s nuclear programme was the issue that divided the two countries in the nineties even though it remained dormant in the preceding decade as the joint struggle against Russian occupation had higher priority for Washington. The divergence was to surface once the Soviets were defeated and US goals changed. Wide-ranging sanctions were imposed on Pakistan in the coercive chapter that followed. Even when re-engagement took place years later,itwas definedbyitsmostlytransactionalcharacter. Nevertheless, for Pakistan it has been a critical bilateral relationship. Islamabad sought as it does now to predicate relations with Washington on Pakistan`s intrinsic importance rather than as a function of a third country or be viewed through a single prism.

When the two countries cooperated on a common goal it worked to their mutual benefit, as illustrated by Al Qaeda`s decimation in the region, which Zahid writes about in much detail. This did not however obscure the sharp disagreements between them over the war in Afghanistan. Conflicting views on why America`s war ef fort faltered generated a clash of narratives thatunderlined how fraught this ostensibly cooperative period became. In an insightful chapter titled `What`s your Plan for Afghanistan` Zahid highlights dif ferences over strategy by detailing the conversations between Pakistan`s army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and General David Petraeus. `You must go for reconciliation` (with the Taliban)Kayani is cited as advising the US general when Washington rolled out its new counterinsurgency strategy. But `for the Pentagon talking to the Taliban was a form of capitulation`. Kayani`s extensive parleys with various US of ficials saw him boldly articulate Pakistan`s position that the war needed a negotiated end. But there were then few takers of this view in Washington.

Kayani is cast in a positive light in Zahid`s book not only for being a `thinking soldier` who `had a strategic mind`. He writes approvingly of his consistent efforts to convince the US that the war was unwinnable and needed a diplomatic strategy a view Washington came around to several years later. His role at home also gets a positive mention:`General Kayani led his forces in one of the most successful counterinsurgency campaigns in a treacherous terrain.` And `despite constant conflicts with the civilian leadership, he didn`t let the democratic process get derailed. Kayani oversaw two democratic political transitions (2008 and 2013) during his six years in of fice.

Zahid`s skilful weaving of Pakistan`s internal politics, the changing fortunes of president Pervez Musharraf and US interests is one of the most compelling parts of his book. He describes how the US and UK sought to forge an alliance between proWest moderate forces Musharraf and the PPP to avert a `right-wing backlash` and lend legitimacy to the military ruler. He explains why the plan went awry, with Musharraf compelled to give up the army chief`s of fice and then Benazir Bhutto`s tragic assassination. Thereafter Asif Zardari `became the accidental beneficiary of the reconciliation deal between Musharraf and Benazir` in which the US ambassador Anne Patterson played a key role.

He also recalls the `reciprocity` Washington elicited from PPP leaders. Both Zardari and prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani assured US of ficials they had no problem with American drone strikes, which were immensely unpopular in the country and an infringement of Pakistan`s sovereignty.

Writing about tensions between Zardari and the army he claims that `both the civil and the military leadership would confide sensitive information to the US envoy and use her to carry messages to the other side, underlining the growing civil-military divide`. The author`s purpose is not to indict the Pakistani leadership but to demonstrate how the dynamics of the no-win war permeated though the Pakistani power structure and shaped the politics of that period.

For me what is most important about the book is that it is written by a Pakistani who is not defensive about his country`s interests and who by his deep understanding of the country`s policies is able to offer Pakistan`s perspective on a pivotal period in a dispassionate and persuasive manner.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.