**At a crossroads**

BY TOUQIR H USSAIN 2022-01-29

WHETHER the US and Pakistan are engaged or estranged, their relations have never been without challenge. In a rare moment, ties are now at a crossroads.

Washington does not know where Pakistan figures in its Indo-Pacific strategy. And Pakistan does not know how much space it has for the US in its relations with China.

US-China tensions have created a schism in Pakistan`s strategic thinking. Its decision to skip President Biden`s Democracy Summit followed by the offer to be a bridge between the US and China signals Pakistan`s desire to be in both camps but also its uncertainty about Washington`s response. A new US ambassador is expected in Pakistan soon, and arriving as he will after his Senate hearing, may bring some clarity to Islamabad`s perceptions of US policies and help its own policy choices.

Even though the US-Pakistan relationship is more than six decades old, neither side has a well-defined view of the other and its policies. They have thrice engaged with each other, each time prompted by Washington`s short-term need for Islamabad`s cooperation to serve its critical security and strategic interests, and Pakistan`s long-term need for US economic support and strategic patronage. But their interests were only partially served. In fact, each side used the other to advance its own agenda that impacted negatively on the other`s interests. Both benefited but also felt aggrieved.

At the centre of Pakistan`s complaints is the inconsistency and expediency of the US approach to Pakistan. Consistency and continuity are actually attributes of a strategic relationship that Pakistan never had. The closest it came to such a relationship was in the first engagement with the US from 1954 to 1965. To its credit, the US strengthened Pakistan`s defence capabilities and potential for economic development that was of critical help in stabilising the new state and launching the platform for sustained economic progress.

But with the US-Soviet détente, only indispensable American allies were retained, not Pakistan. Since then, neither US-Pakistan relations nor Pakistan have been the same. Pakistan has had no permanent importance for Washington, nor any lasting place in its foreign policy. Its importance has varied according to fluctuating US interests in the region, positioning it sometimes alongside Washington, and sometimes against it.

Since the 1980s, US-Pakistan ties have largely been conflict-related, involving the two Afghan wars of the 1980s and the recent one and the war against terrorism the American one and Pakistan`s own. But these wars had either terribly flawed strate-gies and bad partners or were unnecessary and avoidable. Conflict-related relations are often troubled especially if the wars are not going well. The relationship serviced faulty policies on both sides, setting each other up for blame for their own failures and enhancing the scope for contention.

The second reality checl< Pakistan needs to carry out is not to expect equality in US ties with itself and India. These two relationships have different purposes, roles and trajectories. But it is possible, though at the moment improbable, that US-India relations could weaken. India is essentially a revisionist power and the US must not ignore the possibility that given India`s size and ambition it could become a strategic competitor in the region one day.

The third factor is the US-China tension.

With so many interlocking interests the US and China are eventually going to find a modus vivendi call it `competitive coexistence` or `managed strategic competition`.

Even if this best-case scenario does not come to pass, the targeting of China-Pakistan rela-tions by Washington would not serve US interests. It will not hurt China but destabilise Pakistan. And an unstable Pakistan, the US fears, would foster militancy, endanger its nuclear assets, and raise the potential for conflictwith India, threatening US security and strategic interests.

Finally, Washington needs Pakistan`s cooperation not only to stabilise Afghanistan and help with counterterrorism, for which Pakistan`s military and intelligence cooperation is critical, but also for any crisis management in India-Pakistan ties which is of interest to Islamabad too.

There are thus many reasons for US-Pakist an engagement but it will not come without US conditionalities and pressure, some of which Pakistan will have to accommodate, for its own sake and for the sake of its ties with America, without compromising its vital interests including strategic ties with China. A weak Pakistan would need both the US and China, while a strong Pakistan will be sought by both. Failure will have no companions. The choice is Pakistan`s. Foreign policy, like domestic policy, begins at home.

And the National Security Policy is a good start.  The writer, a former ambassador, is adjunct professor at Georgetown University and Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore.