**A strategic reset**

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Tuesday, Nov 26, 2024

A strategic reset in Pak-US relations is essential to forge a mutually beneficial relationship on a long-term basis. Due to the transient nature of past security and containment projects, a community of US sceptics has gained ground in Pakistan, encouraging fiery populist rhetoric by political actors seeking to gain a few brownie points with the electorate.

The US, often dubbed the ‘neighbour of every country’ due to its global reach and influence, holds a significant position in world affairs. It is, therefore, counterproductive for Pakistan to sour relations with such an omnipresent neighbour.

US-Pakistan relations need to transcend the outdated client-protege mould and steer clear of the global power competition that dominates the geopolitical landscape today. The US must also reevaluate its tendency to view US-Pakistan relations through the lens of its ties with China and India. This approach risks a significant loss of geopolitical influence in a region that serves as a crucial bridge between South and West/Central Asia. The American strategic community must also realistically assess India’s capability to act as a regional gendarme on behalf of the US.

India’s aspirations for strategic autonomy, coupled with its limitations in standing up to a vastly superior China and militarily strong, nuclear-armed Pakistan, should concern US policymakers. With a sanctioned Iran and an unstable Afghanistan obstructing connectivity options to West and Central Asia, the US cannot afford to leave this geopolitical terrain open for China and Russia’s expanding influence. Both nations are actively making inroads into the region, which could come at the expense of US interests.

The question then arises: what US interests could justify treating South Asia as strategically vital, despite the current trend of prioritising East Asia and the Asia-Pacific? These interests largely stem from the need to counter China’s strategic ambitions, which are underpinned by its economic and infrastructural connectivity initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). South and West Asia, rich in untapped mineral and natural resources, hold tremendous economic potential. Any investor with the right technological and financial resources could gain a significant advantage in the region.

The unrest in post-JCPOA Iran and the Middle East have exposed the strategic vulnerabilities of the US and its allies in West Asia. This vulnerability is compounded by the absence of a significant US presence in South and Central Asia. The US’s investments in Asia-Pacific alliances like AUKUS, QUAD, and IPEF may not suffice when tensions escalate, especially given India’s reluctance and inability to confront China.

The biggest challenge for the US and Pakistan is to develop a new, sustainable model of engagement that converges on both strategic and economic interests. Strategically, this model could include cooperation on counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, and nuclear non-proliferation. Economically, it could involve linking the Asia-Pacific trade and economic grid with BRI.

By promoting Indo-Pak rapprochement and fostering East-West connectivity – linking India, Pakistan, and Central Asia – projects like the TAPI Pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline) and CASA-1000 (Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission and trade project) could be operationalised. These initiatives would provide substantial opportunities for US private sector involvement in mega infrastructure projects.

Two clear advantages could accrue to the US from such connectivity initiatives. First, they would provide the US private sector access to the rare earth mineral resources of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Second, they would grant the US significant economic leverage over Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian States, undercutting the overwhelming economic dominance of global competitors like China and Russia.

Realising these geopolitical and economic dividends, however, requires a departure from the neoconservative strategic mindset that currently favours a decoupling approach. Instead, the US should move beyond George Kennan’s strategy of containment and embrace Eliot Cohen’s engagement strategy, focusing on narrow and specific interests.

The newly elected Trump administration should resist the influence of anti-Pakistan advisers. Strategic engagement with Pakistan would provide the US with greater leverage vis-à-vis China and India, while broadening its options for engagement in Central Asia. Pakistan, with its population of 240 million – 64 per cent of whom are under 30 – is an important player in the region. The young, bilingual cohort is better poised to integrate into US academic and work cultures. Furthermore, the Pakistani diaspora in the US, including 13,000 doctors, presents an invaluable asset for fostering stronger ties.

Pakistan offers attractive economic opportunities for US investors in sectors such as agriculture, energy, mineral resource exploration, and information security. The US remains Pakistan’s largest export market, and both countries have been signatories to the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) since 2003. This agreement has the potential to significantly boost bilateral trade and investment.

Pakistan could expand its exports to the US to $5 billion over the next three to five years in industries such as textiles, food, and information technology. Additionally, the US could assist Pakistan in diversifying its borrowing sources by facilitating multilateral guarantees from partners like Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

On the climate front, a regional climate fund aimed at fighting climate change could serve as a concrete manifestation of the potential for collaboration between the two nations. The Pakistani diaspora in America could play a pivotal role in facilitating capital investments back into Pakistan. Currently, around 80 American companies operate in Pakistan, and despite challenging economic and political circumstances, none have reported losses. However, Pakistan must improve its corporate dispute resolution mechanisms and regulatory environment while encouraging the entry of US commercial banks to attract further investment.

Pakistan is already the recipient of the largest Fulbright programme in the world and the second-largest International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme after Jordan. These initiatives could be expanded to foster a US-Pakistan Educational Corridor (UPEC) and enhance IT collaboration, leveraging the Pakistani diaspora’s presence in Silicon Valley and the broader US tech landscape. Such collaboration could yield significant strategic dividends for both nations, giving the US greater geopolitical heft and economic flexibility against its global competitors.

A strategic reset in US-Pakistan relations has the potential to redefine bilateral ties in a manner that benefits both nations. By fostering a partnership based on shared strategic and economic interests, the US could strengthen its geopolitical position in South and Central Asia while Pakistan could gain much-needed economic and technological support.

This reset would require both countries to break free from the constraints of outdated frameworks and embrace a forward-looking, mutually beneficial partnership. Only then can the full potential of this critical relationship be realised.

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