**A topsy-turvy relationship**

Maheen Shafeeq

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Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan’s relationship with the US has become somewhat cordial. This is not because the two are experiencing highs in their relations, but because of the lack of expectations the two have with each other.

Due to this lack of expectations, there appears to be a smooth line in the previously cyclical relations between Washington and Islamabad. In 2021, Pakistan actively participated in the US exit strategy from Afghanistan, as a broker of a peace deal between the US and the Taliban, and by facilitating the evacuation of US and other foreign nations from Kabul. This was the last significant geostrategic interaction between the two states.

Since then, the two countries have diverted the focus of their partnership away from geostrategic ambitions. The divergence of US-Pakistan national interests became evident through the release of the US National Security Strategy (NSS) in October 2022. Experts noted that the NSS had no mention of Pakistan’s role and expectations of it. Many experts considered it a good sign but not good news. This could be due to the reason that Islamabad has been unable to deliver the expected actionable results desired by Washington.

However, it is more likely that no mention of Pakistan in the US National Security Strategy 2022 was due to the shift of US strategic priorities. The current US strategic goals aim to out-compete China and constrain Russia, as mentioned in the NSS. It is believed that Pakistan, in this regard, can neither play a role to out-compete China, due to its close strategic partnership, nor can it constrain Russia.

Pakistan has adopted a neutral approach towards major international powers in the great power competition. Especially, in terms of its relations with the historical strategic ally, the US, and its all-weather friend, China, at a time when the two sit vastly on the opposing camps. Instead of putting Pakistan between a rock and a hard wall, the US has downgraded its strategic courtship with Pakistan.

The US has opted for India as a new strategic partner in the region due to India’s souring ties with China over border disputes and a yearning to out-compete China. This reveals that America’s strategic goal of out-competing China could be addressed by India, hence the close ties between Washington and New Delhi are being witnessed on various bilateral and multilateral forums.

It remains unsure if New Delhi will truly be willing to counter China, especially in the Indo-Pacific region as stressed by Indian-American expert Ashley Tellis. Likewise, India’s close and historic strategic ties with Russia stand as a striking flaw in the relationship and the expectations.

Regardless of the growing diversity of strategic sight of Washington and Islamabad, the two states are supplementing the realm of their strategic relations through multifaceted cooperation. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan when relations between the US and Pakistan were at a crossroads, and it was unclear what the approach of their future relations would be, I suggested looking into other areas of cooperation such as counter-transnational terrorism, arms control, trade, media, education, democracy and climate change. These are the domains where the two states have cooperated for years. A somewhat similar approach has been seen in bilateral relations since then.

At an international conference held in October 2023 at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), eminent experts on US-Pakistan relations stressed the necessity of bridging the gap left by taking the slice of strategic cooperation out of US-Pak bilateral relations. The speakers emphasized that the relations between Washington and Islamabad, though downgraded, were not in crisis and US exit from Pakistan is unlikely due to the importance of this relationship in Washington and Islamabad.

All the speakers stressed prioritizing bilateral cooperation in domains of trade and investment, climate change, clean energy, educational exchanges, and people-to-people contacts.

Rigorous efforts to buttress relations in these domains are evident in the form of the US ambassador’s visit to Gwadar to explore its potential as a regional trans-shipment hub. Prior to this, the US had criticised and refrained from being involved in projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Pakistan’s focus on geo-economics has always maintained its open-for-business banner. This initiative showed that the US has also adopted a renewed approach towards regional development. The Gwadar Port, once fully operational, will serve as a gateway to Pakistan’s largest export market in the US.

Good US-Pakistan ties can also lead to numerous other initiatives such as enhancing agricultural yield and use of technology; youth development through scholarships, entrepreneurial initiatives and educational exchanges; climate resilience by promoting green alliance framework for sustainability, green shipping to reduce carbon emission, support during floods and Covid-19; enhancing people-to-people ties by reducing visa wait times, resorting cultural sites, promoting inter-faith dialogue; and bolstering security ties to reduce border infiltration and militancy.

Though there is not much cooperation in the strategic domain, a complete frost on that front was negated when the US state department approved a potential sale of F-16 aircraft equipment to Pakistan in September 2022. While the focus on aspects related to sociocultural development neatly aligns with Pakistan’s geo-economics, Islamabad believes US-Pakistan strategic relations can have a much broader scope.

With an active war in Europe to constrain Russia and rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific to out-compete China, it is unlikely that Pakistan would become an important player in the US strategic goals until it has the capability to act as a bulwark against either. While this is a mythical expectation, Islamabad should flap some wings to open more avenues of strategic cooperation with Washington.

China refused to communicate with the US after the balloon incident and the US cancelled Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to China. In case of any escalation, maybe in the Indo-Pacific, it would be prudent for Washington to have a historical strategic partner that stood with it during three major turning points in US history – the 1970s rapprochement with China, the 1980s invasion of the Soviet Union, and the 2000s war on terror and Pakistan’s supportive role in the US exit strategy from Afghanistan. Regardless of grievances and misunderstandings, the two states have a long-shared history of enduring partnership, which cannot be dissociated.

In the new great game, Pakistan maintains harmonious relations with all major powers – China, Russia and the US. Likewise, Pakistan maintains good relations with Ukraine, unlike India which has shattered any hopes of a constructive role in this matrix after its G20 presidency. Pakistan’s close ties with Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia also provide it with an edge over these states.

In South Asia, though the US has lifted boots from Afghanistan, peace and stability in terms of countering terrorism and issues beyond remain crucial to the US, where US-Pakistan collaboration can play a vital role. Without peace and stability in the region, even investments in India can be futile. Pakistan also maintains good relations with states in the Gulf region, where it has played an important role as a builder of security forces.

Pakistan is also enhancing its cooperation with ASEAN states. To sum up, given the constantly changing nature of global dynamics, it is imperative for Washington to onboard states that possess a diverse and adaptable profile. These aspects provide a chance to develop broad-based, long term and sustainable relations between Islamabad and Washington.

Understandably, US-Pakistan relations have accumulated years of distrust and miscommunication that now has a chance of resetting. Neither state can ignore the other; therefore, it becomes pertinent that while advancing strategic relations in new ambits, the two sides take into account the concerns of the other when embracing China or India.

While it is stressed that the relations between Washington and Islamabad should be free from the lens of other states, it might be an uphill battle until somewhat fair treatment is ensured. Given that US global influence is not receding anytime soon, Islamabad should not become too optimistic about its limited role in Washington and must explore new narratives.

The writer is a research analyst

in emerging technologies and

international security. She tweets/posts @MaheenShafeeq