**Biden presidency Allusions for South Asia and Pakistan**

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Democrats are conventionally known as strong advocates of democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Among the most pressing issues on the Joe Biden’s ‘to-do list’ atop foreign policy, linked to South Asia, is the war in Afghanistan offering hard choices. Regardless of the blunders of President Donald Trump, Afghanistan may have a possibility to achieve some form of political settlement and significantly reduced violence in near future. What will this mean for US-Pakistan relations? Apparently, it is unlikely to drastically change issue-specific and transactional environment of the relationship between the two countries. Nevertheless, it will present Pakistan with new opening to strengthen its strategic and economic ties with the USA, especially as planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan compels Washington to redefine its strategic interests in South-Asian region.

For the first time in over two decades, Pakistan is not a foreign-policy priority for a new US administration. Since 2001, Pakistan has been a focus of the War on Terror and critical to US military involvement in Afghanistan. But that security imperative no longer drives US foreign policy at the moment. A shrinking US military footprint in the region is reshaping Washington’s strategic thinking. In place of counterterrorism, the United States is bound to be guided by great-power rivalries—foremost among them managing its correlation with China.

Biden like Trump has been an advocate of withdrawal of USA troops from Afghanistan. So much so that Biden had previously vocally opposed Barack Obama’s troop surge in 2010 in spite of then being the Vice-President. He has also been supportive of the peace process in Afghanistan that began later during the Trump presidency. A crucial difference between the views of Biden and Trump has been that while Trump wanted the troops out at any cost, Biden chooses a more gradual and responsible withdrawal of forces. Biden may further slowdown the pace of troops departure if violence level continues to surge in near future and if the Taliban keeps rejecting ceasefire or violence reduction demands. Biden is expected to be stricter than Trump in interpreting the US-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020, which calls for absolute ceased cooperation of Taliban with al-Qaeda and other players that wish to threaten America. The situation, nevertheless, in Afghanistan will remain complex, uncertain and fluid and it is difficult to predict the end result of such a chaotic milieu.

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On the other hand, how the situation unfolds in Afghanistan could dictate its broader outlook towards Pakistan-US future interactions. For decades, Washington has largely viewed the USA-Pakistan relationship through the binocular of Afghanistan. The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan means that Pakistan will soon need to identify a new beginning between Islamabad-Washington connections. The establishment in Pakistan must view Biden’s victory as an opportunity to whom it could sell the theme of its indispensability to any straightening out of the Afghan loop. By virtue of several decades of working with the USA foreign policy, Biden will begin his term in the White House with a far deeper understanding of Pakistan than Trump had. After all, Biden was Vice-President when Osama Bin Laden was discovered in a mansion in Abbottabad.

Biden has been a major champion of growing and expanding the USA-India strategic and economic partnership. He played a lead role, both as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as Vice President, in systematically deepening strategic engagement, people-to-people ties, and collaboration with India on global challenges. In 2006, Biden was the one who announced his vision for the future of USA-India relations. He has also worked to make that vision a reality, working with Democrats and Republicans, to approve the USA-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008. The Obama-Biden Administration also named India a “Major Defense Partner”. He is projected to deliver on his long-standing belief that India and the United States are natural partners, and will place a high priority on continuing to strengthen the US-India connection.

The fact that mother of Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris’ hailed from India and she continues to nurture ties with her relatives in India holding warm feeling towards the native country. It will definitely add more weight to the USA-India relationship. Nevertheless, some analysts quoting both Biden and Harris have argued that India will come under increased pressure from the US administration on issues such as secularism and human rights violations in Jammu & Kashmir as well as other parts of India because Biden had fleetingly referred to each of these concerns in his election-campaign document titled Joe Biden’s agenda for Muslims. China’s growing worldwide economic impact is another ingredient which determines the nature and scope of the US–India crucial diplomatic and strategic relationship in South Asia. Biden’s stance toward China, nevertheless, has already hardened over the past and will face major challenges in South Asia, whether it is ending USA involvement in Afghanistan or countering China’s increasingly aggressive control in the South-Asian region.

The paradigm for India-Pakistan relations is changing. With Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States de-linking conflict between India and Pakistan from their respective relationships with those countries, Pakistan is being forced to reevaluate how it engages its traditional partners on the defining feature of its foreign relations with many countries in competition with India.

The United States no longer stays fixated on terrorism only, which means it is no more paying attention to Pakistan in the ways it did after the 9/11 attacks. Pakistan therefore needs to be keen to find new ways to engage the United States. These sentiments, exhibited at the highest levels of military and civilian leadership in Pakistan, are motivated by the pragmatic realization that the country can no longer take US interest for granted as the United States shrinks its presence in Afghanistan.

In foreign policy, there are no permanent friends or enemies among the nations, but interests. Pakistan-US relations under Biden, given to the past cordiality, are likely to strive for a marginal improvement only which essentially will continue to be transactional and issue-specific, focusing on bilateral connection rather than relying on India as its guide. Although, the dictum ‘remain relevant to USA’ is significantly valid for Pakistan today as it was in the past, yet in a nutshell, any broadening of the US relationship with Pakistan in a bid to weaken Islamabad’s bonds with Beijing must be contested.

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