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December 5, 2020

**Can Biden help reset ties?**

President-elect Joe Biden is picking his team to pull the world back towards the United States of America, This is a herculean task. Thanks to outgoing President Donald Trump, many allies have already drifted away from Washington. Pakistan is one such example. Can Biden reset the US-Pak relationship?

There are signs that the Biden administration will seek better engagements with all its allies who were either disregarded, discredited or humiliated in the past four years. Pakistan may not loom large but cannot be ignored either.

Trump had accused Pakistan of ‘lies and deceit’. Though he later termed Prime Minister Imran Khan ‘a very good friend of mine’ and developed a ‘very good relationship with Pakistan’, he couldn’t establish enough trust to restore aid.

In addition to that, the Trump administration used the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as a leverage to pressurize Pakistan to take concrete steps against extremists that supposedly pose threats to India and Afghanistan.

There were two major positive developments on both sides, though: The US stopped violating Pakistani territory and halted its drone attacks, and Islamabad helped broker a US-Taliban peace deal. With this in the background, the Biden administration will take charge of these ties now.

Should Islamabad expect a whole reset in its relationship with Washington? Definitely not. However, it would not be a surprise if some bilateral ties are restored.

The first step to a reset in ties can be the appointment of an ambassador to Islamabad. The US has long been represented on an ad-hoc basis. Over the years, it has become a norm that one charge d’ affairs passes the baton to another deputy head of mission.

An out-of-the-box approach is needed to fill the post. Opting for a Pakistani-American democrat to take the charge can be a good gesture. After all, a number of such trustworthy persons had long campaigned for the Biden-Kamala ticket. Leaving their hospitals and businesses, they had dedicatedly mobilized ethnic minorities to come out and help beat the incumbent president.

Dr Asif Mahmood who hails from California is one such example. He is so trusted by Kamala Harris that she took him into confidence the day she decided to run for president and later for vice president. Time-tested personalities like him deserve an even better post in the new administration.

Tahir Javed, who hails from Texas, is also a man of integrity. During the campaign trail, Joe Biden had visited him in his house and even got the blessings of his mother. Dr Ijaz Ahmad of New York is another example. A few months ago, Joe Biden had told him in front of a large audience that "People look to you. They look to you to see who you like because they know that you know people. You are a vouching force. And, I promise that we will do our best to not in any way embarrass you or let you down".

Personalities like these can help bridge the gap and improve the trust level on both sides. Then come five basic questions: one, will the Biden administration look beyond an Afghan-centred, India-centred or China-centred approach? Two, will it seek to develop a real bilateral relationship, ignored over the last four years? Three, will it help root out extremism instead of compounding the problem by restarting drone attacks? Four, will it remove the ‘lies and deceit’ tag by restoring aid? And, last but not the least, will Washington help provide Pakistan with advanced sensitive technology to strengthen infrastructure?

Certainly, the answer to at least three questions is a big NO. But, a seasoned politician like Joe Biden, who has once even served as the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, may find a way out.

Washington is well aware that China is at a strategic advantage in this region. That is the very reason that the Biden team has repeatedly said that ‘revitalizing alliances is the main priority’ as President Trump has alienated them all.

A lot of water has already gone under the bridge. Pakistan has moved far closer to China and is now seeking better ties with Russia as well. After all, India is allowed to pose a far aggressive posture in the region. In the last two decades, India has emerged as an adversary who happens to be the major defence partner of the US. With Washington’s tacit support, New Delhi is also fast spreading its tentacles all over Afghanistan.

India has committed to provide $3 billion in the name of development projects in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. On the other hand, in the recent Afghan donor conference, the 27-member European Union has pledged $1.4 billion for the same purpose.

A natural question that comes to mind is: will post US 'exit' from Afghanistan will the country be largely dominated by India? Or, putting it plainly, what will new Afghanistan mean to Pakistan?

It is evident that strengthening and deepening relations with India is going to be ‘a very high priority’ of the Biden administration; Delhi is being given the task to tackle obvious ‘global challenges’. One expects that, just like Donald Trump, Joe Biden will not go beyond toned-down statements against human rights violations in Kashmir.

With that in mind, is reset a real possibility? And can allegations of ‘lies and deceit’ be replaced with more familiar semi-diplomatic words like ‘do more’?

Well, when Obama took office, Hillary Clinton was tasked to reset the US-Russia relationship. She gave a symbolic reset button to her Russian counterpart in Geneva. Instead of translating ‘reset’ (perezagruzka) it said ‘overload’ (peregruzka).

In the years that followed, the reset actually turned out to be an overload of the same policy. Let’s patiently wait to see what happens to US-Pakistan ties. After all, Pakistan is a country that forged an alliance with the United States right from inception.

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