**Mending ties**

BY TOUQlR H USSAIN 2021-11-09

IT is a rare moment in the history of US-Pakistan relations. Traditionally, they have either been up or down, or suffered from what is often referred to as `benign neglect` by Washington. But right now, relations seem to be going neither up nor down.

And Washington is not neglecting but ignoring Pakistan.

The reality is that Pakistan cannot be ignored. It will remain relevant for Washington because of its location at the crossroads of Afghanistan, Russia, China, India and Iran. Pakistan`s relations with China impact the US Indo-Pacific strategy, and its tensions with India undermine New Delhi`s capability to balance China. While Pakistan may not be able to bring peace in Afghanistan it can certainly prevent it.

Indeed, Pakistan can facilitate or complicate US interests in the region.

But the problem is, Washington seems tired of the relationship. Political rhetoric on both sides is not helping either especially on the US side where there is a resurgence of US criticism of Pakistan`s role in the failure of the Afghanistan war.

Yet that is not the whole picture. At a Congressional hearing in September, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that in times ahead the US will not just look at `the role that Pakistan has played over the last 20 years but also the role we would want to see it play in the coming years and what it will take for it to do that`.

Obviously, Washington has longand short-term interests in mind. In the long run, the US would be interested in limiting Chinese political and economic influence in Pakistan. At the least, Washington would like to ensure that Pakistan does not undermine America`s Indo-Pacific strategy.

But Washington is not focused on the long run surrounded as it is by many uncertainties principally the future of US-China tensions. Washington also sees ambiguities in Pakistan`s regional policies and lack of resolve in improving the economy, ambivalence in the fight against extremism, and indifference to creating an environment of trust in relations with Washington. No surprise that Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman had said during her recent visit to India that Washington was looking for a relationship with Pakistan that served only a `narrow and specific` purpose.

Pakistan wants a broad-based relationship but Washington is uninterested not just because of pressures coming from its extraordinary relationship with India but largely due to the uncertain US-China equation. A conflictual US relationship with China would spell trouble for Pakistan but both China and the US have been reassuring the world they do not want a conflict. Ata press briefing after his participation at COP26, President Biden walked back from his earlier provocative China rhetoric.

The fact remains that the international system cannot live in perpetual tension as it enhances the risk of conflict specially with America having militarised its Asia policy with its Indo-Pacific and Quad strategies.

The bottom line is that in this nuclear age war between the big powers is unthinkable for many reasons. For one, there is too much economic interdependency at risk.

China and the US are eventually going to settle on a stable equilibrium and a managed strategic competition, or what one might call a competitive coexistence and having their own spheres of influence. The question is how the US would play this competition through undermining China by punishing the countries allied with it, or by of fering them an alternative? If the latter, it would mean a flexible US approach towards Pakistan. But that is in the long run.

Meanwhile, Washington`s does have shortterm priorities for which a limited relation-ship with Pakistan is essential.

Washingtonisinterested in Pakistan`s role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan and help with counterterrorism there for which Pakistan`s militarv and intel-ligence cooperation is critical. he US would also like Pakistan to get the Afghan Taliban`s cooperation in weakening entities like the IS-K. As the Taliban may lack the will and capacity to do this, the Americans also want to have their own operations for which they need air lines of communication from Pakistan.

How will Pakistan respond? Being economically weak and dependent on external powers, and struggling with potential instability, caused by challenges of extremism and socioeconomic discontent due to poor governance, Pakistan`s policy options are limited. Dependency is a slippery slope.

And Pakistan faces another dilemma: how to get the Afghan Taliban on board to meet American demands.

As the two countries move forward to fix their relationship there are thus plenty of uncertainties ahead to which policies of not just Washington but Islamabad and Kabul as well will contribute.  The writer; a former ambassador, is adjunct professor at Georgetown University and Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore.