**Pak-US ties: the other view**

Amanat Ali Chaudhry

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The Pakistan-US relationship is one of the most consequential bilateral partnerships in the world. The state visit by Pakistan’s first PM Liaqat Ali Khan laid the foundation of a partnership that has weathered many storms but still managed to sail through the rough waters.

Despite having divergent approaches, successive Pakistani and American leaders have shown pragmatism to work together in an effort to iron out the differences to the mutual benefit of their countries. Two examples suffice.

First, our shared fight against communism remains the high point in our decades-old engagement. The collapse of communism fundamentally transformed the world order. Second, the US-Pakistan alliance was instrumental in largely destroying the infrastructure of terrorism. The neutralisation of transnational terror outfits such as Al-Qaeda, and IS, etc is the result of the joint coordination and strategy.

Among experts of international relations, there has been a tendency to describe these bilateral ties from a single lens of security and geo-strategy. This approach however misses other essential aspects of the relationship.

A sizable number of Pakistani-Americans provide a bridge between Pakistan and the US. Their contributions to the development of their adopted country are as significant as their share in shoring up Pakistan’s economy in the form of remittances.

The US continues to remain the preferred destination for Pakistani students. An admission to an American university is considered a passport for socio-economic mobility. The US runs one of the largest Fulbright programmes in Pakistan under which hundreds of brilliant Pakistani students have acquired quality education and are now making an important contribution to their home-country.

The power of American democracy and its ideals of liberty, respect for human rights and hard work being the basis of upward mobility remains unwavering. The American Dream inspires people.

President Joe Biden’s election came as a sigh of relief for people in Pakistan. His strong advocacy for the revival of globalism, affirmative climate change actions and privileging peace over conflicts found a common cause with most Pakistanis. President Biden knows Pakistan more than any other US leader in recent memory. As the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and vice-president in the Obama administration, he worked very closely with Pakistan.

The Doha peace deal between the US and Taliban was the result of sustained efforts made by Pakistan to persuade the latter to initiate the dialogue with Washington. It is however in the context of the Taliban takeover that there has emerged a publicly stated difference of opinion.

While the bilateral relations seek to find their moorings and restore the balance, the core aspirations of both countries for Afghanistan remain the same. Both Islamabad and Washington agree that the Taliban should respect their commitments with regard to the formation of an inclusive government, and honour women and minorities’ rights; and that the Afghan soil should not be used for terrorism.

Pakistan is advocating global engagement with Afghanistan to help avert a humanitarian and economic crisis, warning the world community at the same time that disengagement will be catastrophic in terms of the threat of terrorism becoming real again and the deepening human tragedy.

The US, on the other hand, is acting upon the policy of ‘wait and see’ before it can clarify its Afghanistan policy. Islamabad wants the international community, principally the US, to use their diplomatic and economic leverage to make Taliban partners in peace building in the war-torn country in an effort to prevent one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes from taking place.

As National Security Adviser Dr Moeed Yusuf put it in his op-ed for Foreign Affairs, “A wait-and-see approach, although more politically tenable for many countries, would be tantamount to abandonment.”

Pakistan is also hurt by the signals emanating from Washington that seem to hold Islamabad responsible for the American embarrassment in Afghanistan. Such an approach flies in the face of facts and could do lasting damage to bilateral relations.

Pakistan is advising the US against repeating the policy of the 1990s and also looking for a reset in relations. It is to be understood that the transition from deep engagement to estrangement, as witnessed after the end of the cold war, will raise the costs for both the countries.

The endgame in Afghanistan was never going to result in clear victory and defeat in the traditional military jargon. To assume so is to forget the lessons of conflicts in Afghanistan. It has always been a no-win war. To single out Pakistan for the failure of military strategy in Afghanistan is counterproductive.

The Pakistan-US relationship has had a trajectory of its own, despite occasional setbacks. These ties are too important to be left at the mercy of other concerns. Looking at relations with Islamabad through the prism of India is not the right thing to do, as it downplays the importance of bilateral ties. The American relationship with Pakistan should be decoupled and needs to be repurposed through political, economic and diplomatic investments to the mutual benefit of both countries.

Dealing with Pakistan through the Indo-Pacific framework also belies the prevalent reality of our partnership and imposes choices that can be detrimental to the interests of both the countries. If anything, the US has a great deal of influence to bring Pakistan and India to a negotiating table. The situation in South Asia continues to be fraught, especially in the wake of the illegal annexation of Occupied Kashmir by India. The American role in restoring the status-quo ante before August 5, 2019, can be helpful for peace and stability.

Maximalist positions and extreme expectations have done Islamabad and Washington no good. If anything, they have added to mutual frustrations and created suspicions of each other.

Post-withdrawal, fundamental to the relationship is the need for sustained communication and an ability to read each other’s strategic intent clearly. The leadership in Islamabad and Washington needs to have a shared assessment of the challenges and opportunities to rethink the relationship.

The current US policy for Pakistan gives the impression of being coercive and inhibits in-depth and fruitful engagement. The focus on geo-strategy to the exclusion of other factors is what essentially makes our relationship transactional in nature.

The US-Pakistan engagement can be based on the following points: one, avoiding public criticism of each other and crafting a statement of principles that emphasises mutual respect. Two, reviving strategic dialogue and multi-tiered consultations at various levels of both the governments.

Three, both countries should have no problem pursuing their respective development priorities. Given Pakistan’s massive needs for growth and development, it should not be expected to become part of a major power struggle.

Four, Pakistan is located at the gateway of Central Asia and has the potential to foster connectivity and become a transit hub. The US can benefit greatly from trans-regional economic and trade cooperation.

Five, in an interdependent and globalised world, a shift from geo-strategy to geo-economics is not just desirable but also an acute necessity. Geopolitics has limited validity and the time for it is probably over.

Six, the US corporate sector can identify projects for investment in Pakistan. Both governments can take steps to facilitate greater business cooperation by improving ease of doing business, strengthening people-to-people contact, and educational, cultural and parliamentary exchanges.

A Pakistan-US partnership will certainly be a positive factor in promoting regional peace, stability and development. For that, Islamabad and Washington need to show imagination, creativity and courage to learn from the mistakes of the past to chart the way forward.

The writer, a Chevening scholar, studied International Journalism at the Universityof Sussex.

Email: amanatchpk@gmail.com

Twitter: @Amanat222