**Reality check for US-Pakistan relations**

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It’s a new day in Washington DC but it’s the same old story for Pakistan. ‘America is back,’ says President Joe Biden, burying Trump’s ‘America First’ mantra. Meanwhile, Pakistani policy makers are eagerly looking for a reset in ties with America, pivoting away from a relationship anchored in security considerations to a partnership based on the economy. In this piece, I’ll explain why Pakistan’s attempt at re-setting ties will fail, for no fault of Pakistan. And how we can move from a trajectory of failure to reasonable success.

The fundamental challenge is twofold. America is hurting at home, with COVID-19 ripping through the country like a cancer, taking half a million lives and infecting nearly 30 million people. Meanwhile, America’s political system teeters on the edge with Trump’s vote ko izzat dau campaign refusing to die. All this means that President Biden will be focused squarely on problems at home rather than making big moves halfway around the world.

The second part of this challenge is that Pakistani policy makers believe the world revolves around them. For the last two decades, this was partly true as our geo-strategic location next to Afghanistan meant that Pakistan was on the top of every White House administration’s priority list of headaches. Today, this is no longer the case. There is an opportunity that lies elsewhere for Pakistan though. China and Iran are two of America’s biggest foreign policy priorities for President Joe Biden. Both happen to be Pakistan’s neighbours.

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First though, one must congratulate Pakistani policy makers for getting their act together and moving away from anchoring our relationship on security. This is the right thing for Pakistan to do in the long term, which makes it even more painful that America couldn’t care less in this moment. Pakistan is a rounding error when it comes to America’s trade and while the economic partnership will benefit Pakistan, we must pull together a better pitch to pique America’s interest.

So, here’s a lay of the land and how we can pull a rabbit out of our hat. America’s long-term strategic interest in the region is to compete with arch-rival China, who happens to be Pakistan’s best friend. America’s biggest containment bet against China is India but they appear to be stuttering with farmer’s protests, human rights abuses in Kashmir & an ‘independent’ policy making streak that makes them less than reliable. In the short term, America’s biggest priority is a graceful exit from Afghanistan and they believe Pakistan holds the keys to that.

President Biden’s medium-term interest is to re-enter the nuclear deal with Iran and keep the Saudis in check. On all these fronts, Pakistan can offer paradigm shifting policy options to the Biden administration that can sweeten the deal beyond an economic partnership. Most recently, Pakistan stood up to Saudi bullying by not recognizing Israel and continuing to protest the lack of OIC interest in the Kashmir cause. The Saudis thought that Pakistan would buckle under pressure as they asked for their loans back, but Pakistan stood its ground. With a new administration in Washington DC that’s not as chummy with the Saudis, an insecure Saudi wants to play nice with Pakistan again.

What Pakistan needs to present to America is a bold vision for ushering peace and prosperity to the region, while providing a laboratory for America & China’s peaceful co-existence of interests in a country like Pakistan. In return for a stronger economic partnership, Pakistan can offer America the help that it needs to secure a graceful exit in Afghanistan. With the Taliban holding all the cards on the ground at the moment & Biden wary to commit more troops, America can provide a surge in economic aid to both Afghanistan & Pakistan to secure a fragile peace after its withdrawal. Moreover, America can sweeten the nuclear deal for Iran by opening up economic linkages via Pakistan and providing a carrot / boost to Iran’s struggling economy.

Finally, on China, harsh words and rhetoric will only go so far. Ultimately, the two sheriffs of the world will have to learn to collaborate, in parallel to competing on the global stage. Pakistan provides a unique laboratory for this experiment on peaceful co-existence to play out.

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