**Rebuilding Pak-US Ties**

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On September 29, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited the embassy of the United States in Islamabad to celebrate the completion of 75 years of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the US. The US Ambassador Donald Blome hosted the occasion.

The event was a recognition of the fact that bilateral relations remained in cold storage, even if not turned hostile. It was vital for Pakistan to recognise that there was a need to repair bilateral ties. The meeting was the first public gesture to rebuild Pak-US ties, perhaps from the point, they were left unattended. The rebuilding effort coincided with the arrival of the US Ambassador to Pakistan and Pakistan’s PM taking over charge.

A public gesture was important to convey the message to Pakistanis that both countries had once again been trying to find common grounds for friendship. This was especially critical because the rebuilding of ties was seen in the background of the US forces departing from Afghanistan in August 2021. The exit had heralded the end of the twenty years of the war on terror.

Bilateral relations are now barren of any glitches, such as the US pressing on Pakistan to “do more” and Pakistan presenting utility bills for spending on its part of the war. Both countries used to question the intent of each other, though Pakistan is still a victim of retribution launched by the Afghan Taliban. At least, the doomed era of Pak-US mutual suspicion is now over. The path is clear to reconstruct relations confidence, though countering international terrorism is still a US concern. The same is true about the way the dust settles in Afghanistan.

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The meeting also indicated that Pakistan is no more asking the US to extend financial support in the form of either military aid or civilian assistance. There are no prospects for any direct financial aid either. Pakistan has to rely on its resources. Nevertheless, recent floods may prompt the US to convince International Monetary Fund to ease restrictions on Pakistan, and that too would be a temporary measure. Permanence would be self-reliance.

With the end of the war on terror, the wells of direct military aid have dried up. One year before vacating Afghanistan, the US had stopped military aid to Pakistan. This was the vilest low in bilateral relations, the pivot of which had been military assistance to Pakistan. Now, the US is only generous in offering Pakistan spare parts of the F-16 planes that Pakistan had bought from the US, at subsidized rates, to fight against the threat of communism coming from Pakistan’s northwest border. Though the threat is now non-existent, Pakistan has to keep its fighter planes trimmed and functional.

Addressing a diplomatic reception, Pakistan’s PM said that Pakistan’s relations with the US should not be viewed through the prism of China or Afghanistan. Here, once again, Pakistan oversimplified the situation. Whereas the war on terror taught the US how to fight a protracted war on a foreign hostile land such as Afghanistan, the US still considers Afghanistan relevant through the hallway of Pakistan. Similarly, the US considers that Pakistan should not fall into any debt trap of China.

On the occasion, Pakistan’s PM also said, “We are doing what friends and partners do – support each other when it is needed most…Our partnership has been advantageous to both countries.” Equating Pakistan with the US on the table was an attempt to defy ground realities–the way Pakistan banked on US financial and military aid several times in the past. The US Ambassador reminded the guest that the US had supported Pakistan in constructing schools, hospitals and highways. Further, the US offered scholarships to Pakistani students. Moreover, the US remained the largest source of foreign investment in Pakistan. This was a soft reminder. Former US President Donald Trump used to give Pakistan harsh reminders.

What the ambassador did not deliberately mention was that the US remained the main purveyor of modern military hardware to Pakistan since the 1950s. Further, the US remained a provider of direct foreign aid to Pakistan amounting to billions of dollars, both before and during the war on terror.

The occasion has served at least one purpose. It cleared the web of suspicion that the streets in Pakistan could be heated with anti-US sentiment to the detriment of the US. Instead, PM Sharif expressed interest in normalising relations and reviving faith and trust in the US, though the latter is no more in need of such virtues. Self-interests as national interests have gone supreme. The last decade of the war on terror remained disappointing to the US, which considered Pakistan underperforming deliberately. The issue of Dr Shakeel Afridi is yet to be resolved amicably to make possible full restoration of bilateral amicable relations.

Generally speaking, rebuilding Pak-US ties is still a misnomer. Barring the sentimental stir-prone streets, Pakistan’s educated, professional and entrepreneur groups try to remain attached to the society and economy of the US. Doctors, engineers, computer experts and lawyers among other professionals yearn to visit the US to upgrade their professional knowledge and skills at some relevant institutes. Pakistan’s youth crave to study at the top universities in the US. Not surprisingly, a certain class in Pakistan is disinclined to rupture relations with the US.

The meeting was generally a good omen for Pakistan to give diplomacy a whirl to revive relations with the most powerful and technologically advanced country in the world. It is high time Pakistan sought the support of the US in the import of technology related to the areas of science, medicine and engineering.

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