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**Reset relations**

Like the proverbial city on the hill, the US has acted as a magnet for those who wanted to live out the American dream. For the world at large it was a colossus that bestrode the world with equal beneficence and malevolence for those who either joined its bandwagon or crossed its path.

The most visible element that distinguished America was its cultural appeal and soft power. Under Trump, however, that appeal waned while the world watched with disbelief the US withdrawal from Paris Treaty and WHO commitments. The Biden Administration brings a whiff of hope redolent of Wilsonian ideals for a world enervated due to pandemics and conflicts.

Commonality of interests and values has always presented a challenge to Pak-US relations. While American interests have been changing with a change in the geo-political environment, values usually remain unchanged. The Canadian values of “Peace, order, and good government” are sometimes contrasted by sociologists with the American values of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” to highlight the commonalities and differences between the two countries.

Pakistani values of peace, egalitarianism and abstemiousness would surely find resonance in the revolution inspiring work – “Common Sense” – of one of America’s founding fathers, Thomas Paine, who believed that while governments could be bad societies are essentially good. The value convergence and cultural attraction of US’ soft power has resulted in a large Pakistani diaspora in the US excelling in education, health and business.

Pakistan’s relations with the US are entering a new phase – leaving behind an era of geo-political engagements, based primarily on time-bound transactional alliances, serving evanescent interests. The bigger question now staring both countries in the face is the new trajectory of relations keeping in view the compulsions of the prevailing geo-political environment. Pakistan is looking at a future engagement with the United States according to a new national narrative framed in keeping with the dictates of a new era of geo-economics. The new national narrative revolves around a trinity comprising economic connectivity, development focused partnerships instead of aid dependency and peaceful coexistence with the regional as well as global community.

Before touching briefly upon the desired contours of the Pak-US relationship it is necessary to understand the changes in the South Asian geopolitical environment. South Asia is witnessing a resurgence of political rivalry between two global powers. Only this time erstwhile USSR has been replaced by China. Pakistan’s economic interests compel it to embrace China’s economic and commercial vision in the shape of infrastructural development projects that promote trade, commerce, and connectivity for a country like Pakistan famished of those opportunities. Projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offer a rare chance to Pakistan to develop its port as well as hinterland infrastructure.

Fortunately for Pakistan, the Afghan situation is taking a turn for the better. If the peace process in Afghanistan succeeds, the possibilities for the region are immense. The US needs to understand how vital the Afghan peace is for Pakistan’s prosperity, since it also promises connectivity projects like TAPI and CASA 1000 that would benefit all regional countries. It also needs to appreciate that the strategic balance of power between India and Pakistan, despite unresolved disputes like Kashmir, is ensuring a stability that has the potential to be translated into a lasting peace after resolution of the intractable disputes.

Pakistan genuinely aspires to be a connectivity hub instead of a confrontational arena as in the past. This is a most important development that needs to be capitalized upon by all regional countries as well as global powers like the US. A peaceful Afghanistan would need a massive rehabilitation and reconstruction effort which would not be possible without economic connectivity with South Asia. Pakistan emerges as an important connectivity hub and strategic bridge between South and West Asia. It is for these reasons that the United States needs to view it from the prism of geo-economics instead of geopolitics of confrontation.

The use of India as a countervailing force to contain the rise of China therefore appears to be a self-defeating strategy in view of the altered geo-strategic environment in South Asia. Geography no longer confers advantages of big power rivalry in the shape of the aid doles of the cold-war era. Economic connectivity and concomitant development in South Asia is an idea whose time has come. It is up to the US to seize that opportunity to be a part of that development or to forego that advantage.

Pakistan would benefit from a new strategic relationship with the United States based on sustainable economic collaboration in areas like energy, climate change, agriculture, and infrastructure development for our economic security. While cooperation in defence and counterterrorism remains a centerpiece of our traditional military to military cooperation, both countries would benefit more from a non-transactional and sustainable strategic cooperation, premised upon their shared economic interests and soft power convergence. There are possibilities for industrial projects for American companies in the private sector that could make Pakistan a re-export hub for Chinese products to the US and vice versa. The possibility of enhancing mutual trade from the present $2 billion to $10 billion is also worth serious exploration.

Pakistan can also earmark projects in which the US could become part of CPEC as well as other connectivity projects linking Afghanistan with Pakistan. This would provide a sustainable basis for better Pak-US ties in a pro economic development mode. And lastly a value convergence endeavor based upon soft power affinity between the two countries needs to be encouraged through greater exchange of academic resources, enabling cultural integration through student exchange programs. To that end, a liberal and facilitative visa regime for Pakistani students would help both countries a lot.

America’s assent to the hill as a shining city however is premised upon its ability to avoid the Thucydidean trap of confrontational politics with China.

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