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**Resetting Pakistan-US relations**

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Pakistan’s relationship with the Biden Administration has not gotten off to a very good start. Pakistanis that were appalled by the Supreme Court decision to uphold the acquittal of the alleged murderers of Daniel Pearl may only imagine how jarring this decision was for most Americans.

An independent courts system (itself an assertion that remains contentious), will often make decisions that are unpopular, or worse, inconvenient, for the executive branch of government. Despite efforts at damage control, the die may have been cast. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken spoke on the phone, but the US readout of the call made for uncomfortable silences among those that have sought to frame the turning of the page from Trump to Biden as a window of opportunity for a country like Pakistan. I am among those that have been optimistic about the prospects.

Over the course of several months of consultations and discussions with some of the leading economic, foreign policy and security voices in the country, I was privileged to co-author a policy paper to help frame the Pakistan-US relationship, along with my friends and colleagues, Dr Syed Mohammad Ali and Asad Rafi. Titled ‘Pak-Americana: Ushering in a New Era for the Pakistan US Relationship’, our paper tries to establish a framework for thinking about Pakistan-US relations that is distinct and fresh. The burdens of a seventy-year-long partnership are often too heavy to bear for even the strongest couples. For many years now, Pakistan and the US have been anything but a couple. It is long past due for both countries to try to reset the relationship.

The arrival of a new administration, as well as President Joe Biden’s long-standing interest in and experience with Pakistan, should have augured well for the relationship. The convergences between the military leadership and PM Imran Khan and his cabinet should lend even greater weight to expectations for Pakistan-US relations to change for the better. Sadly, nothing in the bilateral relationship tends to go very well, especially when better relations are urgently required. With the Doha Peace Process hanging by the thinnest of threads, China-India tensions affording New Delhi all kinds of capital in Washington DC, and Pakistan’s economic ambitions requiring strong US and Western political support, good Pakistan-US relations are as important as they have ever been.

In our Pak-Americana paper, we have argued that the relationship needs to be seen from the perspective of seven drivers. First, Pakistan and the US need to transition from being geo-political or geo-economic partners to becoming geo-economic partners. In short, the focus of Pakistan’s engagement with the US needs to be trade, regional cooperation and economic growth rather than the geostrategic salience of Pakistan. Of course, it takes two to tango. The key challenge this proposition poses for Pakistani decision-makers is why American interlocutors will see Pakistan independently of Afghanistan, India, China or Iran, and more importantly, what difference this will make.

Second, we argue that human security and people-to-people relationships need to be made central to the bilateral engagement. Pakistanis reportedly constitute the seventh largest diaspora in the United States. But is Pakistan seen as the seventh most important country in Washington DC? Pakistan must seek ways to increase the access of young Pakistanis to higher education opportunities and advanced academic achievement on US university campuses. We argue, as many have before, that Pakistani-origin Americans and the wider Pakistani diaspora in the US must become key informants of Pakistan’s engagement with the US. This represents a challenge for Pakistani diplomats: can the traditional diplomacy of the Foreign Office grow to become more oriented to a diverse and often discordant diaspora community?

Third, we argue that Pakistan and the US must partner for Afghanistan’s future. This is a deliberately long-term and ambitious framing. Pakistani and American bankers and engineers should be rolling up their sleeves to help actualize some of the long-term economic connectivity ideas for the region that have suffered from too little US and Western attention: be it the Central Asia Regional Economic Corridor, or the variety of infrastructure and power projects seeking to meld together the economic interests of countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The reality is that as long as conflict shapes Afghanistan, this ambition remains a distant dream.

Pakistan has certainly been proactively supportive of the peace process in Doha. It must continue to emphasize the need for an Afghan-owned governance model, acceptable to the people of Afghanistan, and inclusive of all key political actors in that country. It is also imperative that Pakistan strongly and unabashedly stand for the rights of Afghan people, from female safety and mobility, to children’s education, to the freedom of the press.

But Afghanistan may represent the most vexing and most urgent challenge for the Pakistan-US relationship. It is clear that the Biden Administration is seeking to buy time, so that the May 1 deadline for its full withdrawal can be pushed out, and Taliban concessions on violence reduction, at a minimum, can be sought. It is also clear that the Taliban have a sense of momentum that they feel will propel them past the deadline in an advantageous position, come what may. In this game of chicken, it will be the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan that get crushed.

The Obama era veterans in the Biden Administration are going to do what comes naturally to them: pin the entire burden for a further contamination of the already deep quagmire in Afghanistan on Pakistan. This is deeply unfair and unfortunate. But it is also the most likely outcome of disagreements on the pace and tenor of the Doha Peace Process.

At its heart, the Afghanistan issue threatens to undermine not only any ambition to recast the relationship between Pakistan and the US, it also threatens to upend wider plans that Pakistan and its current leadership may have, in terms of turning around its economy.

The fourth driver of the relationship in our report is China. We argue that Pakistan should be turning great power competition into great power collaboration by investing in its diplomatic capability to help both Washington DC and Beijing as an interlocutor. If the US and China can pursue shared interests and avoid conflict, among the greatest beneficiaries will be an economy-oriented Pakistan.

Fifth, we argue that Pakistan must contend with the India-US strategic alignment by persuading Washington DC to avoid allowing newfound convergence with New Delhi to compromise Pakistan’s national security or Pakistani interests. It must also continue to highlight the risks of US acquiescence to Indian action that vitiate the regional atmosphere, including its continued occupation of Kashmir.

Sixth, it is vital for Pakistan to deepen and expand its counterterrorism cooperation with the United States to defeat global terrorism. Pakistan has a demonstrable capability in counterterrorism. The more robustly the two nations invest in intelligence cooperation for counterterrorism, the easier it will be to address other areas of miscommunication or distrust.

Finally, we identify climate change as a key driver for a better Pakistan-US partnership. President Biden’s Special Envoy on Climate John Kerry is a skilled diplomat who is one of the few US politicians that understands Pakistan’s concerns in the region and beyond. Pakistan has a strong case to make for itself as a key climate change mitigation partner – both because of its vulnerability to climate issues, and the strong record of PM Khan in advocating for and acting on climate change concerns.

Ultimately, Pakistan’s management of its relationship with the US need not come at the cost of any other relationship. The more clearly and effectively Pakistan takes leadership in solving problems that affect the region, the more easily it will be able to argue for much improved treatment, not just far away in places like Washington DC, but also within its own neighborhood.