**[Ties with the US](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425443/ties-with-the-us)**

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GOVERNING Pakistan is an unenviable task in the best of times, not least when the country is faced with an economic meltdown and a diplomatic squeeze. The solution to both is intrinsically linked — with the US holding one of the keys to relieving the pain. Incoming prime minister Imran Khan isn’t going to have an easy time managing this account.

In his otherwise mature, conciliatory, and inspirational [victory speech](https://www.dawn.com/news/1423041), his take on the US relationship is the one aspect that left me concerned. He was in the usual Pakistani vein on this one, implying that Pakistan had been mistreated and that the relationship needed to be ‘mutually beneficial’ and ‘balanced’. I would have glossed over it, but Khan feels passionately about this and may want to press the issue with Washington. If he does, he’ll find himself in a rather impossible position.

Examine: [*Imran Khan’s opportunity with America*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424252)

His victory wasn’t Washington’s preferred option. Much of what is said and thought of him is tied to his disparaging stance on the US war in Afghanistan and his sympathetic views towards the Afghan Taliban. Several columns written on him in the Western press since the elections have also tended to highlight his negatives.

*It won’t be an easy ride when it comes to America.*

People around Khan say he is misunderstood. I agree. But his statements on the US and the Taliban back in the day did go too far and he did little to correct the impression. For instance, many tried to convince him to engage the policy community in Washington in recent years to develop rapport and street cred (in anticipation of becoming prime minister one day), but he resisted.

The perception of manipulation around the polls will make it harder. Ironically, this Pakistani election cycle was hardly on Washington’s radar till election-day. The town is too distracted with multiple other international and domestic crises. Since the elections, however, the conversation is back and focused on the alleged pre-poll manipulation and perceived establishment support for Khan. This may come up in his dealings with the US often enough.

On the substance of bilateral ties too, his hand is constrained. For starters, he (as should the US side) must stop feeling that the US-Pakistan relationship has not been mutually beneficial. Both sides have gained tremendously from it over the years; each would have been worse off without the other. But ‘balance’ isn’t possible. In fact, in the short term, the government’s desire for balance is going to run up against the compulsion to raise money to get the country out of the economic hole it is in. Asad Umar has already sounded the alarm bells, and rightly so. Pakistan needs the IMF but the US administration has been uncharacteristically candid in drawing a link between the donor agency’s leaning and the state of US-Pakistan ties. From everything I am picking up, this doesn’t seem to have been a hollow threat.

This brings us to the question at the heart of everything. Can and will Khan do anything different to move the needle on what is presently America’s one-point agenda in the bilateral relationship: Afghanistan?

We’ll have to wait and see. His previous stances were opposed to the US ask of Pakistan to ‘do more’. This can further complicate his government’s equation with the US. But, if he is persuaded to think otherwise, he’ll have his first test vis-à-vis the ‘system’. The establishment seems convinced that a stick-heavy approach against these actors will backfire. Pakistan, therefore, prefers to offer positive incentives to the Taliban to join a US-led peace process in Afghanistan. The US wants this support, but in addition to and ideally at the back end of more direct Pakistani efforts to undermine the influence of the insurgency in Afghanistan.

One important indication of Khan’s approach to foreign policy management and the US relationship will be his selection of the foreign minister and his decision on the fate of Ali Siddiqui, the incumbent Pakistani ambassador to the US. I hear that there is some talk of recruiting a foreign minister from among those usually available for the establishment to anoint. If so, the deadlock will remain.

Siddiqui’s case is interesting as the PTI had formally opposed his appointment. Yet, Siddiqui has begun to make significant inroads in Washington and switching him now would — apart from the embarrassment of unceremoniously dismissing the second ambassador within months — mean that the successor would have to go through his or her own learning curve. This will set the government further back in terms of managing the day-to-day diplomatic affairs of the relationship.

Handling the US partnership — or whatever is left of it — isn’t going to be fun for the incoming prime minister. The sooner he begins to pay attention to it, the better.

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