**Time to Reframe Pak-US Relations**

[Jahanzaib Ali](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/jahanzaib-ali/%22%20%5Co%20%22More%20Articles%20by%20Jahanzaib%20Ali)

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Since the Biden administration took charge of the affairs, the Pakistani authorities have been waiting for a clear South Asian policy. However, it is now time to realise that handling the new team is going to be much different and tougher than the Trump Administration.

Both in his recent interviews and at the floor of the National Assembly, Prime Minister Imran Khan was clearly frustrated. Understandably, because President Biden is not entertaining his request for a phone call for the last six months. He has even tried to snub the American leadership just like he engaged with former US President, Donald Trump. In 2018, PM Khan engaged in a war of words with President Trump on Twitter. It was all about Afghanistan and the sacrifices of Pakistan in the war against terrorism but after that, few meetings between the two leaders melted the ice. Taking on the Biden administration with the same approach might work, but we must remember that the current president of the US was also the vice president in Obama’s tenure. At that time, there was a lack of trust, especially after the Abbottabad operation against Osama bin Laden.

It looks like Prime Minister Imran Khan tried to kill two birds with one stone. The recent interview and speech were not only appreciated by hardcore anti-American voters in Pakistan, but they also seemed to have grabbed the attention of the top minds of Washington DC. I was at the White House Correspondents’ Association’s reception and many of the reporters covering the White House termed his recent interview a hard-hitting approach. Still, they suggested that the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan would open the way for a fresh start in US-Pakistan relations.

They were asking me about the civil-military relationship in Pakistan. They were also keen to know the agenda of Prime Minister Imran Khan. I told them the challenges being faced by Pakistan–both nationally and internationally–the campaign against corruption and how Pakistani security forces supported him and his agenda. That was probably the main reason behind his hard-hitting interviews and speeches. I also asked them why President Biden was not making a call to PM Khan. A few of them talked about a lack of trust. Some cited Pakistan’s relations with China and a few others thought about the Indian domination in the White House.

The media in Washington believes that the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan would open the way for a fresh start in US-Pakistan relations

However, several experts from the US think tanks and former diplomats observed that Pakistan would soon be very important to the Biden administration in terms of security interests and the US cannot ignore Pakistan.

Former US Ambassador to Pakistan, Richard Olson, said during a discussion held at Hudson Institute that this was the time to “right-size” the relationship. He said that Pakistan would remain important unless the last troop left Afghanistan. “We need the lines of communications open for withdrawal and make sure that the Taliban do not use that to attack us,” he said, adding, “Pakistan is critical to prevent that from happening.”

Ambassador Olson continued, “There will be an important role for Pakistan, both for the Afghan peace process and for what I hope will be a regional peace process.”

He spoke of the need to build a relationship that did not emphasise so much on the security and counter-terrorism aspects of the relationship and focused instead on economic and commercial issues and people-to-people ties.

Atlantic Council Fellow, Shuja Nawaz, was also a part of the discussion. He noted, “the dysfunctionality inherent in the nature of relationship.”

According to him, “The US-Pakistan relationship is really a tale of two misalliances: misalliances between United States and Pakistan, an unequal marriage with both sides resentful of each other. And misalliance inside Pakistan, between civil and military.”

Nawaz also emphasised that this time it was critical that the US did not make the Pakistani military “its primary interlocutor” and instead helped Pakistan become a democracy; strengthening its relationship with the civilians and civil society.

He pointed out that even if there was no Afghanistan, Pakistan would have been an important ally for the US and the Wes. Because after all, he noted, it was one of the largest Islamic states in the world; nuclear power and was strategically located–bordering China, India, Iran and overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Center for Strategic and International Studies Senior Associate, Ambassador Robin Raphel, called for an appropriate and realistic proportion in the relationship. He believed in putting the relationship on a more modest plane to make it more stable and sustainable.

Center for a New American Security Senior Fellow, Lisa Curtis, voiced concern about what she saw as the absence of converging strategic interests. She was of the view that currently, there was no convergence of interests between Pakistan and the US on Afghanistan and China.

Another scholar, Dr Joshua White of John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, warned that this time around, there was no support within the US for large-scale financial payments or security assistance to Pakistan in return for a secret arrangement. Keeping a secret alliance seemed more difficult because of the close Pakistan-China relationship and a strong India-US partnership, he added.

*The writer is a Washington-based journalist and author. He has been covering international politics and foreign policy for the last 15 years. He can be reached at jahanzaibali1@gmail.com and tweets@JazzyARY*