**Trump and Pakistan: new, old, same?**

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Trump is back, marking a historic moment not only for the United States but also for its global partnerships. His return to the White House comes after a tumultuous political struggle by the Republicans to reclaim power, mirroring the resilience of its leadership.

Trump’s victory places him in the unique position of being the second US president, after Grover Cleveland, to serve non-consecutive terms. This rarity in American political history invites speculation about the future of American foreign relations, particularly with Pakistan, a relationship that has seen cyclical highs and lows over the past 76 years.

The history of US-Pakistan relations began soon after Pakistan gained independence in 1947. The US was the second country to formally recognise Pakistan, establishing diplomatic ties almost immediately. However, an early missed opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen its ties with the Soviet Union shaped the trajectory of its foreign policy. In 1949, Joseph Stalin invited Pakistan's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, to visit Moscow, but the visit never materialised. Instead, Khan chose to visit the US in 1950, at Washington’s invitation, aligning Pakistan with the capitalist bloc during the early years of the cold war. This marked the beginning of a complex and often fluctuating relationship.

Pakistan's strategic significance as a bulwark against Soviet expansion soon became evident. In 1954, Pakistan joined the US-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and, in 1955, the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), both aimed at containing communism. These alliances cemented close ties between the two nations during the 1950s and early 1960s, with Pakistan receiving substantial military and economic aid. The relationship peaked during the era of president Ayub Khan, who famously demanded “Friends, not Masters” from the US, even as Pakistan continued to benefit from American support.

However, this camaraderie faltered in 1971 when the U.S. failed to intervene decisively during the Indo-Pakistan War, culminating in the loss of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The incident marked one of the lowest points in U.S.-Pakistan relations.

The 1980s brought a resurgence of ties, driven by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan became a frontline state in the US-led effort to counter Soviet expansion. The Afghan War saw Pakistan hosting and training mujahideen fighters, supported by significant American financial and logistical aid. This period not only strengthened US-Pakistan relations but also solidified Pakistan's role as a key player in regional geopolitics. The alliance culminated in the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, marking a high point in bilateral relations.

As Trump returns to the global stage, the future trajectory of US-Pakistan relations remains uncertain. The history of their engagement, marked by strategic cooperation and mutual mistrust, suggests another chapter in this enduring yet unpredictable partnership. How it unfolds in the next four years is anyone’s guess.

Pakistan’s strategic importance in American foreign policy has always been volatile, rising and falling with shifting global priorities. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of the USSR, Pakistan suddenly lost its significance to American policymakers. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its conversion into the Russian Federation marked the end of the communist threat. With the death of expansionist communism, Pakistan’s value as a bulwark against the Soviet Union faded in the eyes of American strategists.

However, Pakistan re-emerged on the American radar in 1998, when it conducted nuclear tests in response to India’s nuclear explosions. These tests made Pakistan a formal nuclear power, drawing international scrutiny and leading to U.S.-imposed sanctions. Despite its newfound nuclear status, Pakistan remained a low priority for Washington until the seismic events of 9/11 in 2001.

The September 11 attacks dramatically altered global geopolitics, thrusting Pakistan back into the spotlight as a frontline state in the US-led ‘war on terror’. The same mujahideen who were once celebrated as ‘freedom fighters’ during the first Afghan war (1979–1989) were now branded as terrorists. In the second Afghan war (2001–2021), Pakistan played a critical role as a major non-Nato ally, providing logistical support and hosting operations for the US and Nato forces. The coalition support fund became a significant source of financial and military aid, making Pakistan a blue-eyed boy for American policymakers during this period.

However, history repeated itself when the US withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in 2021. Once again, Pakistan was left high and dry, as American interest waned after the conclusion of the 20-year conflict.

The history of Pak-US relations is a classic case of cyclical diplomacy, marked by alternating periods of engagement and neglect. From the 1950s to 1969, the relationship flourished during the cold war’s early years. It soured from 1969 to 1979, only to revive during the first Afghan war (1979–1989). A period of disinterest followed from 1989 to 2001, before 9/11 rekindled the alliance during the ‘war on terror’ (2001–2021). Since the withdrawal from Afghanistan, relations have once again cooled.

This cyclical pattern – of highs during strategic alignments and lows during perceived irrelevance – reflects the pragmatic, interest-driven nature of Pak-US relations, often dictated more by global shifts than by bilateral considerations.

The new US administration will formally take charge soon after President Donald J Trump takes oath on January 20, 2025. The future of Pak-US relations during his tenure is again a subject of anybody’s imagination, but such relations will largely depend upon the political dynamics of international relations. He is a different leader, being unpredictable. There is a lot of speculation about what sort of policy will be adopted by his administration. But one thing is for sure: things will not stay the same. There is a clear path as far as South Asia is concerned. Strategic relations with India are already established and strengthened. Pakistan is no longer a strategic partner. There is considerable debate in Pakistan about the potential response of the new US administration under President Trump, particularly in light of the political developments in Pakistan and Imran Khan’s allegations of regime change directly implicating the Biden administration.

Pakistan is undergoing significant political shifts, accompanied by pressing human rights issues that seem to attract minimal attention from the developed world. While such issues warrant immediate action from the government, their impact on Pak-US relations remains uncertain. Historically, international relations seldom pivot on human rights concerns alone, and Pakistan is no exception to this pattern.

Expectations for a renewed era of close Pak-US ties during Trump’s second tenure are low. US state policy is unlikely to deviate significantly from previous administrations, irrespective of who occupies the White House. However, the active engagement of PTI leaders abroad and Imran Khan’s personal rapport with Trump and his family could foster a unique window of opportunity. Personal relationships often play a role, albeit briefly, in shaping diplomatic ties, and this dynamic might benefit Pakistan if leveraged effectively.

Improved relations with the US could strengthen Pakistan’s economic and trade prospects, fostering much-needed political stability. As a nuclear state, Pakistan’s global standing and respect among nations hinge significantly on achieving economic and political resilience – both of which could be bolstered through better ties with the US.

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