**View from Washington**

BY M I C H A E L K U G E L M A N 2020-11-23

WHEN asked what to expect for Pak-US relations under President-elect Joe Biden, one is tempted to say `more of the same`.

Indeed, Biden and Trump don`t agree on much, but Pakistan is a rare case of convergence. For Biden, like Trump, the priorities will be Islamabad`s assistance with peace talks in Afghanistan and its ongoing ef forts to dismantle terrorist networks at home.

Drivers of cooperation Afghan peace talks, bilateral trade, some shared counterterrorism (CT) goals remain intact. The constraints US-China rivalry, US-India partnership do as well. Yet, even amid expectations of policy continuity, Biden will usher in a different era for Pak-US relations.

That`s because his experiences with Pakistan, and his broader foreign policy views, are so markedly dif ferent from Trump`s.

No US president has taken of fice with as much knowledge of Pakistan as Biden. He has crafted Pakistan-focused legislation, made multiple visits, cultivated deep ties with civilian and military leaders, and experienced directly the best and worst periods of the relationship`s recent history. He even received the Hilal-i-Pakistan award.

Biden will enter of fice as the most foreign policy-savvy president since George H.W.

Bush, and he will advance a foreign policy agenda diametrically opposed to Trump`s.

His focus will be on restoring US leadership and reinvigorating democracy and rights.

Accordingly, Pak-US relations under Biden could strengthen considerably or get much worse.

Under the optimistic scenario, the two sides continue engaging on peace in Afghanistan, Islamabad keeps making progressinweakening terroristinfrastructure, and bilateral trade grows more. Biden may bring back parts of the strategic dialogue launched during the Obama years. And his comfort level with Pakistan should enable his administration to pursue effective, meaningful diplomacy.

The relationship may receive another boost through three US foreign policy moves. Biden hopes to take the edge off Washington`s toxic relationship with Beijing; he supports pursuing cooperation in some spaces, including climate change and health.

He aims to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal. And he will be more willing than Trump to broach human rights issues with India.

The more pessimistic scenario is that the Biden administration holds back on expanding the relationship until there is sufficient progress with Afghan peace efforts. If the peace process falters, and Washington believes Islamabad is a reason why, the relationship could suf fer.

Additionally, deepening US-India security partnership means Biden`s White Housewill likely limit its criticism of India on Kashmir, and intensify demands about Islamabad`s actions against India-focused terror groups allegedly on its soil. The `do more` mantra of the Obama years may return. Tellingly, in an October op-ed Biden framed US-India cooperation first as a CT partnership, second as an effort to counter China. Because of the strength of US-India relations, Islamabad will struggle to get Biden`s ear on the issue of India-sponsored terrorism. Biden, like his predecessors, will view this as something that doesn`t directly threaten US interests, thereby exacerbating the disconnect on terror threat priorities that has long bedevilled the relationship.

For all the talk of Biden being a friend of Pakistan, he`s no pushover. He`s had difficult conversations with Pakistani military and intel chiefs about the country`s policies towards militants. He has viewed Pakistan as a key driver of the Afghan Taliban insurgency.

When Biden told Hamid Karzai that Pakistan is 50 times more important thanAfghanistan, he didn`t mean it as a compliment.

He was referring to the seriousness of the threat posed by Pakistan to America volatile politics, alleged terrorism, nuclear weapons, and problematic policies in Afghanistan.Pakistan has changed since Biden made that comment in 2009. The question is if his views have as well. The answer will help shape the relationship`s trajectory.

Either way, Pak-US ties are approaching an inflection point. The relationship has long been viewed in Washington through the lens of Afghanistan. But with US troops headed for the exit, it will need a new basis.

With Biden`s broader Asia policy likely to revolve around countering China, Pakistan risks beingleftonthe outsidelookingin.

Still, there`s an opportunity to recast relations as a stripped-down, but ultimately happier partnership: one fuelled by more cooperation in tension-free spaces like education, IT, and clean energy; pursued more robustly through non-official channels like business communities and the diaspora; and unburdened by unrealistic expectations about security cooperation.

Recalibratingtiesinthiswaywouldensure Pakistan remains important for Biden`s America this time for the right reasons.  The writer is Asia Programme deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars.

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