[Ayesha Siddiqa](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/ayesha-siddiqa)

August 11, 2021

**What is the UK-Pakistan relationship?**

In Islamabad people will point in the direction of the British High Commission as the most important Western diplomatic mission, even more significant than the American.

This is totally believable. Given that the American are not too eager to talk or even make phone, zoom or any other calls, the British are a good available alternative for Pakistan’s power elite. British Chief of Defence Staff General Nicolas Carter is a frequent visitor to Rawalpindi and the British High Commission is the largest diplomatic mission that the UK has anywhere in the world.

Pakistanis are astounded that, despite this, their country remains in the red list while India is moved to a relatively more convenient amber list. The list you are in makes all the difference in the world as passengers from the red-list states have to quarantine at airport hotels and pay over GBP2000.

Pakistan will certainly not remain in the list forever, but that will depend on how fast Islamabad works on improving testing and tracing or producing credible data. Pakistan lacks a strong and effective lobby. Some of the key Pakistani diaspora members I spoke with said that a few letters from parliamentarians will not be effective.

UK-Pakistan ties are located in a fairly narrow band of diplomacy and military relations. There is certainly tactical dependency on both sides. Pakistan does not carry the baggage of post-colonialism in dealing with London. Its state functionaries are friendly and very connected with the UK, especially due to Britain’s various educational programmes. London is practically a second home and a natural refuge for the country’s political class and elite in general.

Britain is tied to Pakistan due to both domestic political and security matters. The approximately 1.2 million British of Pakistani origin that are now part of politics in northern England, and even other places, make it imperative for UK’s politicians to be conscious of Pakistan. The war on terror in Afghanistan and the terror attack in London in 2005 also played a role in bringing the two militaries and intelligence agencies together. For the UK, Pakistan is critical to keep itself secure.

However, the bilateral relations lack strategic depth for which there are structural reasons. First, Pakistan-India relations have turned bilateral ties anywhere else into a zero-sum game. A glance through declassified British foreign office documents indicates that as Sir Zafarullah Khan, the first foreign minister struggled to acquire Britain’s role in the Middle East as it left the sub-region, British diplomats thought that despite its military capacity Pakistan was too bogged down by the Kashmir issue.

Second, the domestic socio-political chasm in Pakistan turned Britain and the US into arbiters for domestic politics and policies rather than equal partners. This made British diplomats stronger. For instance, the fact that a senior British diplomat was a major player in the Benazir Bhutto-Pervez Musharraf negotiations denotes a personalized influence that does not necessarily benefit Pakistan in the long-run.

Third, UK-Pakistan bilateral ties have not extended beyond military and diplomatic contacts. Trade relations are highly unimpressive; including the contribution by the diaspora. Our trade ties do not compare at all with UK-India trade relations. For example, while Pakistan’s trade with Britain hovers around $1.73 billion (2020), India’s is around $24.6 billion. Prior to Covid-19, India-UK trade stood at $32.6 billion. India is the second largest job creator in the UK, with the total revenue of Indian companies in the UK standing at $68.8 billion (2019).

Pakistani-British entrepreneurs in the UK admit that the comparative economic strength of Indians versus Pakistanis does not compare. Apparently, the only noticeable Pak-British business group in the UK is Bestway that has generated sizable employment in the country or has an annual turnover of around a couple of billion dollars. Politically, the Pakistani diaspora is concentrated in the Labour Party that has a diminishing political future. In 2010, Pakistani diaspora leaders got together to form an association called the ‘Conservative Friends of Pakistan’ with the intent to engage with the Conservative Party. The same year the group invited the then prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani who agreed to increase trade. But the plan never came to fruition.

This also means that Islamabad failed to raise its worth to the degree that someone may have lobbied the British government to look and fetch Pakistan’s data from the NCOC website. The government claims that the data was always there and available for Britain to consider, thus making the case of an inherent bias against Pakistan. There is certainly no bias but there is surely an absence of Pakistan’s ability to lobby for itself positively or the foresight to push its data. Moreover, while picking people from the diaspora like Zulfi Bukhari and Aneel Musarrat, the Pakistan government has been lazy in investing time to systematically negotiate a comparable trade agreement like the one London is negotiating with India or signed with Malaysia. The focus of successive governments, including this one, is too much on optics.

Finally, Pakistan is not a prominent story in the field of research and education in the UK. Besides Pakistan’s diaspora tending to shy away from social sciences or higher education in general, there are greater impediments than encouragement to study Pakistan. The Pakistan High Commission run (that now the National Security Advisor wants to replicate in the US) internship/mentoring programme misses the point that an interventionist attitude has made scholars in British universities shirk from working on the country. In the past, a prominent university terminated a Pakistan-funded programme when it became unsure of the source of funding.

In the 74 years after independence, bilateral relations between the UK and Pakistan remain tactical, a corner from where they cannot be pulled out unless Pakistan re-imagines itself. A successful internal negotiation between the various stakeholders at home and allowing a broader ownership to the citizenry is the starting point. The strength of bilateral ties with others is proportional to what happens inside.

The writer is author of ‘Military Inc’, and served as former director of naval research.

Twitter: @iamthedrifter