**Ties of sentiment**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-04-19

FEW of Pakistan`s bilateral relationships are so diverse and multidimensional as the country`s ties with Britain. They reflect a shared history, military, trade, cultural and educational ties as well as Britain`s role as a development partner and increasingly, the importance of the Pakistani/Kashmiri diaspora in serving as a living bridge between the two countries. This doesn`t mean there haven`t been disagreements on key regional and other issues. But that has rarely diminished the warmth in relations.  
  
Over the decades a significant section of Pakistan`s political and business elite went to college in the UK, which contributed to closer bonds.  
  
Tens of thousands of Pakistanis travel to Britain every year for business, tourism or to visit family; on average 60,000 visit visas have been issued annually in recent years. This strengthens the people-to-people dimension. Diplomatic interaction on multilateral issues is considerable given Britain is a permanent member of the UN Security Council a factor Pakistan considers important in dealings with London. Historically the British media was seen by Islamabad as a key source of influence in the English-speaking world which could shape perceptions about the country. While its global impact is arguably less today it remains an important vehicle for Pakistan to get its narrative out.  
  
For all these reasons a new book by the British academic Ian Talbot should interest readers in the country. The History of BritishDiplomacy in Pakistan chronicles Britain`s diplomacy from Pakistan`s inception, formative phase and subsequent decades through its political crises, military interventions, the country`s break-up, wars and near wars until the `War on Terror`. The well-researched book turns out to be a tour d`horizon of Pakistan`s tumultuous history and various turning points. But it tells the story from a British perspective and the vantage point of itsforeignpolicy goals.  
  
Having served as high commissioner to the UK I am in agreement with several of Talbot`s observations. His assertion that British envoys had easy access to Pakistan`s policymakers was mirrored by my own experience of being able to reach top British government ministers, officials and MPs without a problem. London also provides extraordinary opportunities for public diplomacy and soft power initia-tives, which our Mission vigorously undertook. For example, we organised a mega-concert showcasing our culture at Trafalgar Square to mark the 60th anniversary of Pakistan`s independence. British Pakistanis participated enthusiastically.  
  
The success of the Pakistani diaspora has been impressive. British Pakistanis have engaged vigorously in politics with several elected to Parliament and many serving as mayors including the high-profile mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. Today, there are 27 MPs of Pakistani origin, 15 elected to the House of Commons, 12 in the House of Lords and well over 300 local councillors. British Pakistanis are also prominent in the media and have made a mark in many other fields. The frontline role of diaspora doctors in the National Health Service response to the ongoing pandemic has earned them much appreciation. Talbot rightly notes the key role of British Pakistanis and, in describing `diaspora diplomacy`, highlights London`s use of the diaspora to reinforce ties with Islamabad.  
  
From among the principal takeaways from the book, two are noteworthy. One, Talbot`s description of UK`s ties with Pakistan being based on `sentiment` in contrast to America`s relationship with Islamabad that has been `transactional`. The latter however reflects the reality of an asymmetrical relationship as superpowers tend to be more transactional. UK`s ties with Pakistan also have transactional aspects but they do not define the relationship. Talbot argues that `while Washington utilised `hard power` to forward its interests, Britain had `soft power` in terms of cultural and historical ties`.  
  
He accords importance to `personal diplomacy` and colonial and post-colonial era links forged by British diplomats with Pakistan`s political and military elite. This brings up the second takeaway; that in relations with Pakistan, Britain exercised an influence far greater than its political, economic and military power. After 1954, `personal diplomacy compensated for Britain`s diminishing power` writes Talbot. Britain punched above its weight in no small measure owing to the activism of its many distinguished envoys including Nicholas Barrington and Mark Lyall Grant a tradition the present incumbent Christian Turner is living up to.  
  
In the foreword, Bob Milam, former US ambas-sador to Pakistan, makes the point that given the colonial past and longer association, the British understood Pakistan far better than the Americans andlike his predecessors,he often turned toBritish diplomats for advice. The book details how the UK and US worked in lockstep on common goals through the years. Of course, the two countries have different equities in relations with Pakistan but this distinction is often blurred in official and popular perceptions in Pakistan. That sometimes made it difficult for me as envoy to explain to Islamabad that on a specific issue London was not acting at Washington`s behest.  
  
Two portions of the book that are especially interesting deal with early Western efforts at mediation on Kashmir and involvement of British and American diplomats in Pakistan`s 2008 democratic transition. Talbot says that it was the 1962 SinoIndian conflict that sparked Western concern about the Chinese `threat` and `created the circumstances for a protracted Western attempt at mediation over Kashmir`. He recounts that Washington wanted Britain to play a leading mediatory role in the Anglo-American effort to encourage the two countries towards a settlement. Several rounds of the Bhutto-Swaran Singh talks however ended in failure as the positions of Pakistan and India proved unbridgeable.  
  
As for the 2008 events, Talbot narrates the role played by Britain and America in forging the deal between president Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto.  
  
The highly secretive diplomacy he recalls began in 2004 and led to Mark Lyall Grant`s trips to Dubai and US assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher`s `active engagement` with Benazir and Musharraf. At US urging, Grant arranged the first phone call between them in 2006. Talbot claims that Condoleezza Rice played a `crucial role` in the eventual deal which she herself earlier acknowledged in her own book.  
  
Talbot`s book is an eminently readable account of a relationship that has been remarkably stable and which is now being energised by its growing peopleto-people content. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.