

What suits Pakistan? - Part I

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October 23, 2020

For obvious reasons, the US presidential elections receive global attention. However, it is perhaps the first time that these elections are contested in a bitter environment as President Trump has been trying his best to confirm his second tenure at a time when the US has miserably failed to fathom the severity of Covid-19.

With trillions of dollars of economic losses, over 200,000 people already dead and more than seven million infected, the US continues to remain at the top of the global graph in terms of fatalities. Not only this, personally testing positive for Covid-19 was also largely attributed to Trump's non-serious attitude towards the disease, which he has consistently labelled the "Chinese virus".

Trump's policies and actions have not only intensely polarized the American nation but also the international community. Due to issues including the shifting of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as well as trade wars not only with China but at times also with its neighbours like Mexico and Canada and close European allies, the belligerent Trump administration has been aggressively pursuing its agenda of 'America First'. In the process, every now and then the US has left even its old allies red-faced.

As elsewhere, the US presidential elections have gained considerable attention in Pakistan, with the familiar debate regarding whether historically Democrats have remained better friends of Pakistan or Republicans. After the launch of CPEC and an expansion of multidimensional ties between Islamabad and Beijing on the one hand and a relentless US-China trade war on the other hand, a very valid question for Pakistan is: who is a better option to be elected as the new US president? If the Trump administration has remained critical of the growing role of China in Pakistan under CPEC or the overall Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), his successor in the White House would probably parrot the same China-bashing approach. Hence, it will be interesting to see whether a Democrat Biden will come up with a different policy vis-a-vis the growing global role of China under the BRI, and of course regarding CPEC in Pakistan.

The overall history of US-Pakistan bilateral ties reveals that the relationship between Washington and Islamabad has mostly remained transactional. For a comprehensive analysis, readers can refer to my book 'The Politics of US aid to Pakistan: aid allocation and delivery from Truman to Trump' (Routledge/2019). Here, I briefly explain that, irrespective of the fact whether there is a Republican or a Democrat in the White House, bilateral ties have blossomed and remained very cordial whenever Washington was in need of Pakistan's support to achieve its geo-strategic and security goals.

The reign of Truman (1945-1953), a Democrat, witnessed the beginning of the cold war. Pakistan, wary of India's closeness to the USSR, was eager to join the US bloc to safeguard its sovereignty, and was ready to play a key role in the US policy of containment. American policymakers knew that because of its distinctive geo-strategic position, Pakistan could be vital for the containment of communism. Still cautious in their approach not to alienate India, the Truman administration started some economic aid to Pakistan but military aid was not committed.

To counter the communism threat, the Republican Eisenhower (1954-1961) also looked towards South and South East Asia, particularly after the Korean War which brought the cold war to South Asia. Unlike Truman, the new Republican administration under Eisenhower was at ease to form alliances. Hence, the Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement (MDA) was signed with Pakistan in May 1954. In the same year, the US also established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (Seato) and in 1955, the US-sponsored Baghdad Pact was signed to contain Soviet influence. Pakistan was the only country in South Asia which was a member of both these pacts.

After these agreements, the Eisenhower administration started significant military aid to Pakistan. Of all foreign aid Pakistan received during the years 1951-1960, nearly four-fifth was from the US. As the Soviet threat was still there, there was a continuity of the same policy during the reigns of Democrats such as President Kennedy (1962-1963) and President Johnson (1964-1969). In his early years, Johnson's tenure somehow followed Republican predecessors regarding its foreign policy towards Pakistan. The country was still among the largest US aid recipients. However, the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the 1965 Pakistan-India War dealt a serious blow to the US-Pakistan alliance. The response of both Kennedy and Johnson during and after these events was visibly in favour of India. Pakistan was deeply perturbed over the supply of arms and military aid to India even once the Sino-Indian War was over.

During the tenure of President Johnson, the US-Pakistan ties further deteriorated after the 1965 Pakistan-India War. Pakistan was profoundly frustrated over the arms embargo imposed by President Johnson. Although both Pakistan and India faced US arms' sanctions, Pakistan suffered more because it was largely dependent on US weapons, unlike India which was relying largely on arms from the USSR.

There was stability and consistency in US policies towards Pakistan during this period of the cold war. Following their Democratic predecessors, the Republican administrations of both Nixon (1970-1974) and Ford (1975-1977) were in no mood to bring drastic changes vis-a-vis their foreign policy towards Pakistan. Although the Republican administrations during the tenures of both Nixon and Ford provided considerable economic aid to Pakistan, in the case of military aid they were no different from their predecessors. Thus, there was close similarity between the approach and policy of both political parties towards Pakistan during this era.

Like the previous tenures of Democrats, this period also witnessed some upheavals in South Asia. The most significant was another Pakistan-India War in 1971 and no tangible military support from the US. Consequently, Pakistan formally bid adieu to Seato in 1973. While military aid was already negligible, US economic assistance also decreased markedly during these years.

During the tenure of Republican President Ford (1975-1977), two major issues affected US-Pakistan ties: Pakistan's nuclear programme and military coup of General Zia in 1977. The then US secretary of state Henry Kissinger visited Pakistan in August 1976 to persuade Islamabad to abandon its nuclear ambition. In a meeting with Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Henry Kissinger used both carrot and stick to convince Pakistan to disband its nuclear programme aimed to counterbalance Indian threats. It has been stated that Kissinger threatened Bhutto that "we will make a horrible example of you," and added that "when the railroad is coming, you get out of the way".

The year 1979 brought dramatic changes in US policies towards Pakistan. The Islamic revolution in Iran deprived the US of one of its trusted allies: the pro-American Shah of Iran. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and a change of regime in Iran greatly enhanced Pakistan's geo-strategic weight. The Carter (1978-1982) administration had imposed the Symington Amendment in April 1979 on Pakistan and had suspended all economic and military aid. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later in 1979 compelled the Democrat administration to reverse policy decisions taken earlier about Pakistan.

In December 1979, within a few months of their imposition, Washington lifted all sanctions against Pakistan and offered it generous aid. During Carter' tenure, which was just the beginning of a multiyear alliance, Pakistan was provided \$634 million in economic aid while military aid was still not committed.

To be continued

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