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**Pakistan and the US**

Most of the key foreign policy posts in the Biden administration have now been filled. A conversation has started in Pakistan as to how best to manage this important relationship to the advantage of Pakistan. Many are talking about how much ‘leverage’ Pakistan has over the US, particularly given their continued presence in Afghanistan.

This would be the wrong place to start. Incoming US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently said that three countries of prime foreign policy significance to the US are Afghanistan, Iran and China. This places Pakistan in a critical geographical position.

Pakistan would be well advised to thoughtfully understand American goals in each of these countries. Pakistan will find strong congruence between its goals and those of the US, and therefore have a significant basis for cooperation with Washington. This must begin with Pakistan understanding what the US aims are in each of these countries.

In Afghanistan, the US is keen to exit or significantly bring down its military presence while leaving behind a structure so the country does not again become a safe haven for extremists who could threaten US interests. Pakistan also wants a stable government in Afghanistan that would not allow its territory to be used to destabilize Pakistan. One can easily see how these interests can be pursued to the satisfaction of both countries. Earnestly facilitating US withdrawal from Afghanistan will also help relations with Washington.

US policy with Iran has been through a major shock during the Trump administration. For the first time in recent history, the US reneged on a tediously negotiated multilateral treaty that was designed to curb Iran's nuclear development capability. The Biden administration appears eager to go back. In exchange for verifiable curbs on Iran's nuclear program, the new administration appears willing to lift most of the sanctions on the country, as had been agreed.

Unfortunately, it will not be possible to flip a switch and go back to the pre-Trump status. Iran will be understandably sceptical, but with effort on both sides it can be done. Easing of economic sanctions on Iran will not only benefit the people of Iran but also the entire region. An Iran that is open to trade could help with Pakistan's energy needs, among other things. Pakistan should welcome the Biden administration's willingness to re-engage with Iran and play a positive role in bringing the two sides together.

Then there is the matter of increasingly confrontational US-China rivalry. This is a much bigger issue than what Pakistan can help sort out. Pakistan has important economic interests with China and will have to carefully navigate its relationship with both the US and China. It can start by impressing on the US the significance of CPEC to future economic interests of Pakistan. In so doing, it can help demystify China's ‘Belt and Road’ plans.

While some of the ‘Belt and Road’ projects have become a debt trap for recipient countries, China's engagement in Pakistan appears to be a win-win. Pakistan had once played a constructive role in bringing the US and China closer. It can do so again.

That leaves the matter of Pakistan-India relations. All indications are that the rivalry with China will continue to bring the US and India closer. However, given the very serious human rights violations taking place in India against religious minorities – in Kashmir and across the country – Pakistan must keep reminding the US and the world about these violations that fly in the face of democratic norms.

Pakistan faces a unique opportunity to build positive relations with the US. I hope it takes advantage.

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