US still in 2011

[**KK Shahid**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/kk-shahid)

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Perhaps the most staggering feature about last week’s Twitter feud between US President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Imran Khan was the hullabaloo that it mustered given that neither uttered a word that the two states’ leaders haven’t in the past.

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Pakistan ‘providing safe havens to terrorists’? Would be a pretty long checklist if you set out to look for every time Trump’s predecessor Barack Obama said this.

Pakistan has ‘sacrificed thousands in the US War on Terror’? Perhaps an even longer checklist for the number of time the leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People’s Party – including recent premiers – have said the same.

So what’s new? That it happened on Twitter? Yes, one could give those echoing the noise that. Also maybe the very accurate observers who note the similarities between Trump and Khan and their respective propensity to jump the gun – with the mouth or the Twitter handle.

Why then did a crisis like situation emanate from the two leaders basically echoing their states’ sentiments, albeit using undiplomatic language?

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It wasn’t just Trump’s harsh tone against Islamabad, which he established following the South Asia policy announced last year – even if he exhibited clear antagonism vis-à-vis Pakistan during his election campaign – which led to the Twitter standoff.

Nor was it just Khan’s confrontational approach with regards to the US – which he too has long demonstrated by pinning the blame for Pakistan’s volatility on America – that set the ball rolling on the very public of feuds between the two states.

Despite very loud overhauls in the leaderships at Washington and Islamabad, and indeed their contribution to what has transpired over the past week, what has really changed for US and Pakistan are the geopolitical realities.

And unlike the past, it’s perhaps Islamabad that understands this transformation better than Washington.

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For, the US is quite clearly still living in 2011, hoping that it can arm-twist its way into getting what it wants out of Pakistan. The region no longer is in living in the aftermath of the Osama bin Laden raid, and Islamabad no longer has to offer justifications for its duplicitous policies with regards to jihadist groups.

This is primarily because what Washington doesn’t realise – or accept – is that it does not have a carrot to offer Islamabad, and the stick of cutting off the aid has actually contributed to the formalisation of Pakistan’s alienation.

For, Pakistan has found the carrots elsewhere – financially in the shape of Saudi Arabia and China, with Russia offering the military cooperation.

This has meant that where Pakistan served the US interests in the region – or was paid to do so, but rarely ever did – it will now do the same with Russia and China, with the latter especially ensuring that it gets what it wants out of its largest ever overseas investment by micromanaging like the US never did.

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What that means is that after all the money, arms and personnel that the US has poured in Afghanistan for over a decade and a half, it would be China and Russia that looks likely to spearhead the solution in Afghanistan, with the help of Pakistan – the recipient of a significant chunk of the money and arms. The Taliban being invited for peace talks in Moscow earlier this month is further evidence of that.

However, American disaster in Afghanistan does not necessarily vindicate Pakistan’s position and policies – the exact opposite, in fact.

More than Washington, Pakistan’s doublespeak on jihadist groups has boomeranged on the state itself. It is not the US, but the Pakistani state that is responsible for the tens of thousands killed over the past 17 years owing to jihadist terror.

So if the state feels that US failures in Afghanistan would give it license to continue providing those safe havens to specific jihadist groups, and ‘facilitate’ radical Islamists into power in Afghanistan, then Pakistan would continue to bear the brunt of its own masochism.

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If these jihadists couldn’t be contained to hunt specific targets in the past, they wouldn’t be convinced in the future either, with, again, China’s largest ever overseas investment now within their sight.

The writer is a Lahore-based journalist