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**US in Afghanistan**

Very soon after taking office in 2009, President Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This ‘Af-Pak’ setup showed a lack of understanding of how Pakistan-India tensions factor into any resolution of the Afghanistan crisis. US policy in Pakistan's neighborhood is again starting to take shape as key players in the new administration are settling into their roles. Many of them are carry-overs from the Obama Administration.

As often happens, international crises don't care about the timelines of a new administration. The incoming national security adviser has already stated that Afghanistan, Iran and China will require quick attention by the new government. Pakistan happens to be in the middle of all of these.

At the same time, the US appears to be moving forward with its plans for the newly coined ‘Indo-Pacific’ region. An alliance constituted for the purposes of countering assertive Chinese aims in Asia, giving India a prominent role in US policy in Asia.

Afghanistan is on the very urgent agenda of the Biden Administration. The previous administration had signed off on a deal with the Taliban that commits the US to withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. The terms of this agreement are under review by the new US government. No doubt the US will lean heavily on Pakistan to help implement whatever final terms emerge from this review.

In the past, US administrations have often blamed Pakistan for not supporting American efforts and, even worse, playing a double game. This comes to some extent from Washington not properly understanding the stakes for Pakistan in the final outcome in Afghanistan. Previous administrations had also failed to understand this as was evident in the creation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan envoy role.

Pakistan sees the emergence of a hostile regime in Kabul as an existential threat. This would be the case if any emerging scenario post US exit gives meaningful leverage to India in Afghanistan, which continues to make territorial claims against parts of Pakistan, while India is suspected of fomenting unrest in volatile regions within Pakistan.

India continues to angle for more and more influence in any emerging power structure in Kabul, at times directly encouraged by US leadership. Unless the US government understands Pakistan's legitimate concerns, it will be difficult to have Pakistan play a constructive role in the resolution of the Afghan crisis.

On the other hand, Pakistan’s leadership needs to understand the legitimate concerns of the US. Afghanistan territory under the previous Taliban government was allowed to be used to plan a vicious terrorist attack against the US in September 2001. The US is rightly concerned about the reemergence of an Islamist government in Kabul.

While the US military engagement in Afghanistan of nearly two decades has failed to deliver a government that would be more amenable to the US, it can hardly stand by and let power slip to forces that could again threaten its interest in the region and beyond. The respective aims of the US and Pakistan notwithstanding, it is not in Pakistan's interests to be seen as “duplicitous” in Washington.

At the same time, India is set to play a large role in the US policy of containment of China, particularly given the strong Indian lobby in Washington. If there is any hope for Pakistan to achieve its goals in any final settlement in Afghanistan, it must make itself heard clearly and honestly by the new Biden Administration.

America's strategic interests in Afghanistan, Iran and China provide Pakistan a unique opportunity to be a constructive partner to the US, and in the process achieve its own security and foreign policy goals.

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