**Foreign policy challenges ahead**

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With Joe Biden still engaged in recalibrating US relations with various countries, and Prime Minister Imran Khan awaiting his telephonic call, the concerns, priorities and nuances of the American foreign policy are becoming clear in bits and pieces particularly in South and South West Asia, South East Asia and Pacific and the Middle East. It is within the context of these regions that the significance of Pakistan would be weighed and prioritized for its future relationship with the Biden’s US. The US confronts formidable challenges in these regions.

These challenges stem from an array of complex issues of immediate concern to the US leadership that include the rise of China as an economic and military power in South East Asia and Pacific rivaling the US for the world leadership; the unending uncivil wars in the Middle East; the festering hostility in the Gulf region and revival of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; the intractably complex Afghan conundrum; the dangerous standoff in nuclear South Asia involving three nuclear states and India’s deliberate and provocative genocidal policy in the Jammu and Kashmir; the US-Western world’s over-pampering of India as a counterweight to China.

It is the re-adjustment of relations among countries in various regions during the past four years when the US foreign policy was in disarray that makes the task of President Biden more difficult. The long US trade dispute with China; the US pullout from multilateral economic agreements involving the South East Asian and Pacific states and giving space to China to reinvigorate its economic clout; signaling Xinjiang and Hong Kong for human rights violations and discrimination and ignoring the same elsewhere particularly in India, Israel and Gulf States; the reassertion of Russia in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Eastern Europe; the growth in the Chinese economic and strategic presence in all these regions and Africa have had cumulative repercussions to dent the American global leadership.

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Of all these regions, the South and West Asia and the Gulf region would prove more challenging for the Biden Administration for recalibrating the US relations with the major countries with Israel conspiring with some Arab countries to inflame the situation in the Gulf region to render the revival of JCPOA unlikely; India taking the undue advantage of the American political, strategic and technological patronage and quickening its genocidal move in the occupied Jammu and Kashmir and trying to browbeat Pakistan; Pakistan sitting on the convergence of three important regions, and the Taliban veering to strategy of capturing power militarily after losing confidence in in the crumbling peace process. The explosion in the Gulf region and bloodshed in Afghanistan would have perennial repercussions for Pakistan.

There is a veritable frustration and nervousness within the American leadership to contain China. We have evolved past the unipolar world. Today, we have a few undeclared alliances of states to stand to the hegemonic behaviour of the US. The options of the US to contain China have shrunk grossly. The US would bank on the Quad and Indo-China-Pacific alliance to contain its rival. The Indian strategic contest with China – even with the US at its back – would be fraught with dangers for the South Asian region. This nexus between the US and India would of necessity oppose BRI and CPEC and could provoke an ultimatum from the US for the countries of the region to take sides as resorted to by the American leaders in the past.

This would plunge Pakistan between the devil and deep blue Sea. By all means, it would be suicidal for Pakistan to review its relations with a reliable and well trusted friend like China which has invested billions of dollars in CPEC outweighing the sum total of US financial assistance to Pakistan in the past six decades. The US would never be a wise alternative option to be prioritized over China. The likely US ultimatum if ever materializes would compel us to tightly embrace China, and forge close relations with other countries hostile to the US. Would the US avoid this by striking a balance in its relations with India and Pakistan?

However, if the past is any guide, hopes for such US wisdom are bleak. It is the apparent nervous reaction to the rise of China that will drive the US policy in the region. The Americans, at best, will try to create a lull in the hostile exchanges between Pakistan and India or an uneasy calmness on the LoC. They are already doing this. This is where Pakistan should hold its ground. Its commitment to the just struggle of the people of Kashmir should not waver. Will our leadership have the spine to withstand the pressure brought on them by the US without forcing India to restitute the status of the Jammu and Kashmir and start meaningful talks for the resolution of Kashmir according to UN resolutions?

The US policy towards Afghan peace process, though still wrapped in ambiguity, is not difficult to be fathomable. The US will not comply with the date of the final withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. Because of the Biden Administration’s procrastination, the Taliban have increased attacks on the government forces. They seem prepared to resume attacks on the American forces after the 1st May deadline for the withdrawal. This will result in more bloodshed and strategic strain on Pakistan. The final collapse of peace talks will be a welcome development for all peace spoilers including India. The situation would be fraught with challenges for Pakistan. We have to put our act together internally and externally.

The renewed fighting will irk China, Russia and Turkey which have developed great stakes in the return of peace in Afghanistan. It is here that Pakistan could be of some importance to the US. However, Pakistan will have to play its cards wisely without straining its relations with other stakeholders. This is a transactional phase and finally the Americans will have to get out of this long war. We should not be oblivious to this.

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