**The devil is in the details**

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Understandably, the US foreign policy on South Asia is aimed at sustained engagement in the region bilaterally as well as multilaterally. Such engagements are carefully prioritised while keeping in view the contours of Washington’s overall foreign policy and the latest developments taking place in the region. Whether it is the curtailment of Chinese influence, safeguarding the interests of hardware producers or maintaining peace and security, the idea behind this exercise remains the projection and promotion of America’s national interest. Several notable geostrategic shifts, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the incident of 9/11 had necessitated Washington to place South Asia on the front burner of its foreign policy. Other factors included an increased India-US strategic collaboration, the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan, Washington’s fretfulness about the spread of nuclear weapons and the war against terrorism.

Washington’s decision to overlook the simmering tension in South Asia, seen in the wake of developments since August 5, 2019, is not without reason. The hostility between the two nuclear powers might have figured in their assessment as an extension of the old rivalry between Pakistan and India. For the US, Kashmir seems to be an unsettling issue that needed to be addressed and resolved bilaterally. Of course, some kind of action or intervention would be required but only if the ‘stability of the region’ was in danger. To the dismay of optimists researching in various think tanks, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan are still considered as troubled countries while with India, besides addressing definitional disagreements, the policy seeks to find common ground for a US-India strategic relationship. Sadly for Pakistan, it seems, the genuine shared interests are still limited only to combat terrorist outfits.

[321 officials sacked for corruption in Afghanistan](https://nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2021/321-officials-sacked-for-corruption-in-afghanistan)

With this in mind, one can ask if the tweet from the US Department Bureau of South and Central Asia, mentioning ‘India’s Jammu & Kashmir’, was an unintentional slip. The State Department’s clarification or assurance that there has been no change in the US policy in the region was the answer. But unfortunately, instead of bringing lucidity to the US’ policy on the region, the clarification further confused the situation as the tweet was neither recanted nor was it corrected.

Another recent statement made by the US State Department may help in understanding a point or two. The US was closely monitoring the situation along the Sino-India border and was concerned about Beijing’s attempts to intimidate its neighbours. Clearly, the US is not closely monitoring the frequent violations of LoC by India. Nor is it monitoring the rising tensions between the two nuclear states of South Asia. Ostensibly, the US has not monitored India’s undesirable activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan or read the dossier presented by Pakistan. It is not difficult to understand which neighbour, according to the State Department, is intimidating? There you have some clarity on the US-India or Sino-US present state of affairs. For reasons best known to Washington, a series of India’s recently undertaken intimidating actions against its western neighbour are neither being considered important nor being closely monitored.

[India stalling non-proliferation efforts in South Asia](https://nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2021/india-stalling-non-proliferation-efforts-in-south-asia)

Waiting for a phone call from the White House, Islamabad is hopeful of a change in Washington’s stance if not a substantial policy change. Pinning hopes on the new Administration in the US is natural but relying only on its importance with regard to Afghanistan is not enough. It is time that Pakistan considered to what extent it was relevant to the sole superpower of the world. Such an exercise may help in assessing the real nature and scope of the Pak-US relations, especially in the context of Islamabad’s vital interests. Certain constants like grants, mistrust, disappointments and broken promises aside, it is high time that Islamabad formulated a foreign policy narrative, including a page or two on its future relationship with Washington, based on hard facts and not on mere expectations. In the event that the core issue of Kashmir is still in the centre for Pakistan, which it seemingly is, would the US foreign policy for South Asia even make a passing reference to it, is anybody’s guess.

[Argentina’s president decries ‘unforgivable’ vaccine scandal](https://nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2021/argentina-s-president-decries-unforgivable-vaccine-scandal)

In order to assess to what extent Pakistan is relevant in the shaping of the US policy on South Asia, let’s take the events of August 5, 2019, as a test case. Let us see Washington’s reaction, if any, on India taking complete administrative control over the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir, thereby, changing the entire socio-political landscape of the Valley for good. See the fate of Islamabad’s legal arguments put forward especially since 1989 in favour of a UN Security Council sponsored plebiscite to decide the future of Kashmiris from Washington’s perspective. The fact that the international community, spearheaded by the US, has not even offered the routine expression of condemnation let alone stopping or persuading India otherwise, may also help assess Islamabad’s importance for Washington. As Pak-India relations with reference to Kashmir was not a consideration in the policy in the first place, hence, the announcement that there was no change in US policy was spot on.

[Haleem Adil suffers from heart ache, shifted to hospital](https://nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2021/haleem-adil-suffers-from-heart-ache-shifted)

Last but not least, India’s importance for the US needs to be acknowledged by all and sundry in South Asia. At least until it is satisfied with New Delhi’s performance in the region, vis-à-vis China, the US is likely to see the regional situation through the Indian lenses and would continue supporting Indian standpoints on Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is important to note that encouraging India to keep policing the region might have served a purpose or two for the US. Nonetheless, this free lance vigilance is not producing the desired results for Washington. Conversely, India might have gained a BECA or two in the process.

Call it an optimist’s wishful thinking but one hopes the Biden Administration will look into the pros and cons of Washington’s blind faith in India in pursuing its national interests in South Asia. The US must be wary of India’s eroding image as a democratic country. Prime Minister Modi’s RSS driven policies must not be overlooked. Likewise, the foreign policy experts in Washington cannot possibly fail to notice America’s vicarious liabilities as the sole superpower of the world. They might have already taken note of the rising temperature here and sensed the vicious tide that is moving rapidly towards a showdown.