

Outlook of Pakistan-United States Relationship

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With the end of America's longest (and probably costliest) war in Afghanistan, it appears that the country is now redefining new terms of engagement with Pakistan (the only frontline non-NATO ally) in her 'War against Terrorism'. President Joe Biden is best placed for this purpose, who understands Pakistan well because of his previous tenure as American Vice President during the last Democratic Party's administration between 2008-16, under President Barack Obama. During his years in office, Biden remained in close contact with authorities in Islamabad.

To best comprehend the evolving nature of the new terms of engagement of future Pak-US relations, it is important to first ascertain the rationale behind America's hasty pullout from Afghanistan. Apparently, while it was foretold that the US was ending her 'forever war', there were also certain silent strategic motives which the new government was aiming to brace. The Biden administration is shifting US foreign policy priorities with a central focus on tackling the 'China challenge.' This shifting objective will predominantly drive future trends in Pak-US ties as well.

While announcing the end to the two-decade long Afghan mission in April this year, President Joe Biden highlighted Beijing as Washington's number one foreign policy concern. Stressing upon the shifting focus of policy objectives, he said that, 'Ending the (Afghanistan) war would permit America to redirect its energies toward new, more pressing challenges; foremost among them "extreme" competition with an assertive Beijing. As a rising authoritarian superpower threatens to eclipse the United States, technologically, militarily, and economically, as the thinking goes; we can hardly afford to be tied down in an endless war.' This indicates a transition in Washington's renewed foreign policy priority for decades to come and this will determine her attitude toward other states as well.

During the current Democratic rule, military-to-military engagements have been dominating interactions between Washington and Islamabad except a few, where the National Security Advisors (NSA) met or ministerial level talks were held. Otherwise, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director, William J. Burns visited Pakistan twice. First, silently in April this year, and then, more recently to speak with his counterpart and Pakistan's military leadership. Likewise, Director General Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, accompanied Pakistan's NSA Dr Moeed Yusuf, during his visit to Washington to present Islamabad's future roadmap for the bilateral partnership.

More noteworthy is Joe Biden's reluctance in talking directly with Pakistan's political leadership, which also shows the US President's deep understanding of whom to talk to in the country to achieve the desired results. Keeping these factors in consideration, it seems that Washington is pursuing well-

defined objectives vis-à-vis her future relations with Islamabad. Afghanistan would no longer remain a concern for the US as long as their interests do not collide and America's dependence on Pakistan, for engagement with the new government in Kabul, will eventually reduce with implementation of the Doha Peace Process.

Sensing these unfolding realities, Pakistan has flexed her diplomatic muscles to initiate a paradigm shift from its traditionally espoused geostrategic approach to a geo-economics one, under which bilateral ties with the States would be based on economic, trade and business etc. rather than being limited to security and defense. In this regard, Pakistan's NSA quietly met his US counterpart Jake Sullivan on 26 May in Geneva to present a blueprint of future ties; and later, flew to Washington with a similar plan. The proposal was designed to broaden bilateral relations to the realms of economy, trade, business, energy, technology, and climate change. But what is not yet clear is the extent to which the Biden administration is receptive to this new paradigm and why it has remained silent over it.

Besides, informal military-to-military interactions have also been taking place between the two countries that gives the impression that Washington still desires strategic engagement with Pakistan. Previously, the US has been driving bilateral ties, whereas Pakistan remained a dependent variable. Even now, when Washington is preparing for competition with China, it is looking for the kind of relationship that will depend on what Islamabad can offer the former in meeting her strategic objectives.

America currently sees Pakistan in the opposing camp. This creates a strategic complexity for Pakistan which has been trying hard over the past few months to be considered an impartial and friendly state. Biden's approach of dealing with Pakistan from his past experience seems very risky, as Islamabad this time seriously wants to abandon her old policy of using the country's strategic location for leverage between two opposing powers.

Washington, through its erstwhile pushy approach, is compelling Pakistan to pick a side in the China-US competition. This will create a dangerous security dynamic not only for the US or China, but also for Pakistan which will have to re-evaluate her present approach of reconciling interests and broadening ties with America. President Biden needs to consider increasing government-to-government engagement and reciprocating Pakistan's proposal to build a sustainable and long-term future partnership. This is the cornerstone of any future Pak-US relationship based on mutual benefit and cooperation, correspondingly in geo-economics and geostrategic realms.

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