



ARE US-PAKISTAN RELATIONS BEING REDEFINED?

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The relationship between Pakistan and the United States is perhaps one of the most consequential relationships that has traditionally impacted the strategic dimensions of the South Asian region. Given the strategic developments in the region, it is interesting to observe that the two nations never trusted each other's intentions but maintained a strong alliance (in three critical phases: 1950s-1960s, 1980s, and post 2001). While the United States portrayed Pakistan as a vital ally, Pakistan's narratives regarding the strategic necessity of US military (and financial) assistance to Pakistan changed over time. The bilateral relationship has gone through high and low phases, and the last decade has seen a strained phase in the relationship. Former US President Donald Trump took a firm position against Pakistan by cutting down the sale of US military equipment and military, which has been an essential and perhaps the most desirable component (for Islamabad) of the US-Pakistan dynamics. Under President Biden, the relationship suffered a further blow with Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Imran Khan's, accusatory position where he held the US responsible for Pakistan's economic and security woes and finally for his scandalous exit from the PM office.

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The US (till now) has refrained from offering any direct economic assistance and has insisted that Pakistan conduct structural reforms according to the guidelines of the

IMF. While the focus of the previous phases of the US-Pakistan partnership has been security, the current phase of the relationship centres more on both the US and Pakistan attempting to reset ties and redefine common areas of interest based on cooperation in the arena of non-traditional security threats. This is a departure in the US approach from the past, where the acquisition of US equipment by Pakistan has been the defining factor of the US-Pakistan relationship.

Even though, following Operation Neptune Spear and President Trump's tough position on Pakistan, US assistance to Pakistan decreased considerably, Pakistan remained a critical factor for the US in Afghanistan. The US did rely on Pakistan for peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha. Pakistan took credit for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table with the US and finally getting the Taliban into power, which Islamabad perceived and celebrated as a strategic victory.

In the past four decades, Afghanistan has been an important factor defining US-Pakistan relations. After the US exit from Afghanistan in August 2021, the dynamics have changed. There has been a new phase of resetting US-Pakistan ties. The following factors been crucial in this regard:¹

1. US interest in Afghanistan has decreased significantly since its exit from the region, and its reliance on Pakistan has shrunk.
2. US' increasing tensions with China, Pakistan's closest ally.
3. India's strategic and economic rise on the world stage. Expansion of India's diplomatic profile.
4. US' increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China, where Pakistan does not occupy any space. The Biden administration's February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and October 2022 National Security Strategy, and National Defense Strategy do not mention Pakistan. The US has been fully engaged with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad, along with India, Japan, and Australia).
5. Pakistan's increasing reliance on China. Pakistan and US have completely divergent opinions on China.
6. China and Russia's growing closeness, specifically in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. The emerging alliance will invariably impact the dynamics of Pakistan's relationship with Russia in the future.

After the 2021 US withdrawal, there have been serious concerns in Washington regarding regional security and its impact on Pakistan's stability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals. US Chairman of the Joint Chief General Mark Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee soon after the fall of democratic regime in Afghanistan, "We estimated an accelerated withdrawal would increase risks of regional instability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals...We need to fully examine the role of

Pakistan sanctuary”.²

In the first public hearing in Congress about Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Pakistan has a “multiplicity of interests, some that are in conflict with ours...It is one that is involved hedging its bets constantly about the future of Afghanistan, it’s one that’s involved harboring members of the Taliban ... It is one that’s also involved in different points cooperation with us on counterterrorism...this is one of the things we’re going to be looking at in the days, and weeks ahead - the role that Pakistan has played over the last 20 years but also the role we would want to see it play in the coming years and what it will take for it to do that.”³

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The US has an interest in stabilising Afghanistan, focusing on human rights (specifically women’s rights), and would not wish to allow Kabul to become the hub of terrorist activities. Engagement in counter-terrorism and regional security has been maintained cautiously by the Pentagon.⁴ This includes high-level military-to-military engagements and a session of the US-Pakistan Counterterrorism Dialogue in March 2023.⁵

The US and Pakistan’s trade relations have been in Pakistan’s favour. The US has been Pakistan’s largest export market, and the figures for the US import of Pakistani goods stand at US \$5 billion in 2021.⁶ The US has also remained the leading investor in Pakistan in the last 20 years. According to the US Department of State report, US investment in Pakistan for the recent fiscal year has increased by 50 per cent.⁷ Major US investments are focused on “consumer goods, chemicals, energy, agriculture, business process outsourcing, transportation, and communications.”⁸ The US has indicated its keen interest in enhancing economic cooperation with Pakistan.⁹ In February 2023, both countries concluded their ninth meeting under the US–Pakistan Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA).¹⁰ Extensive people-to-people contact is a crucial area of cooperation between the two countries.¹¹ Being a highly vulnerable country to environmental challenges, climate change is another area of potential cooperation as Pakistan encounters serious threats. The 2022 summer floods affected one-third of the country and around 33 million people. The USAID had pledged US \$100 million to support Pakistan recover from these damages.¹²

Conclusions

US-Pakistan relations are currently at a relatively neutral level. Ties have not fallen to the lows of the 1990s, when Pakistan struggled with US sanctions. Nevertheless, US policymakers have conveyed a firm message to Pakistan that the US administration is no

longer willing to provide the easy military assistance it received in the 1980s and 2000s. For decades, Pakistan has sold the narrative to the West and its traditional donors that it is a 'state too dangerous to fail.' A geostrategically located nuclear weapon state with the fastest growing nuclear arsenal and a raging insurgency on its tribal borders, Pakistan, cannot be allowed to fail. This has been the argument driven by Pakistan. However, Pakistan's decreasing relevance on the global stage and its inability to control its security situation, continued political instability, and consistent economic crisis, which require a constant flow of external assistance, seem to have altered the dynamics for Pakistan.

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The US exit from Afghanistan has reduced Washington's direct interests in Afghanistan, but the US still desires a stable Afghanistan that does not facilitate a global jihadi terror network. Washington certainly seeks Pakistan's support on this front. The killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul by US drone strikes in 2022 indicates cooperation on counter-terrorism between Pakistan and the US. Even though Pakistan has denied its involvement in the operation, the fact remains that the feasibility of an operation of this nature remains questionable without Pakistan's military cooperation.

Pakistan's nuclear arsenal has been expanding at a rapid pace, it reportedly possesses approximately 168 warheads, and the past record of nuclear proliferation raises questions about the integrity of the nuclear programme. The US has been concerned about the safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, specifically with the deteriorating security situation in the country. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been emboldened after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. The terror organisation has gathered strength given the reported mergers with smaller/splinter groups and support from Afghanistan. The number of TTP terror attacks targeting the security establishment has gone up significantly in Pakistan. The US cannot overlook the challenges of a Nuclear Pakistan. President Biden did express concern when he said Pakistan is "one of the most dangerous nations in the world" as it has "nuclear weapons without any cohesion".¹³

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The relationship is likely to stay neutral unless a major strategic development elevates Pakistan's strategic relevance once again. The US will continue to engage with Pakistan on non-traditional security issues. On the other hand, while Pakistan welcomes Washington's cooperation on non-security issues, it is also keen to resuscitate the security dimension of the relationship. Even though Pakistan's military modernisation has been very significant with Chinese assistance in the last two decades, Islamabad has always welcomed US equipment. It remains to be seen if the US will revive the security dimension in its dealing with Pakistan.

Pakistan, despite its deep economic crisis and political upheaval, has accelerated its covert operations, such as arms dropping and drug dropping through drones in Punjab (in India).

Given the evolving situation of the US-Pakistan relationship and the strained India-Pakistan relationship, the critical question for New Delhi is whether the US can persuade Pakistan to change its strategic calculus. Pakistan, despite its deep economic crisis and political upheaval, has accelerated its covert operations, such as arms dropping and drug dropping through drones in Punjab (in India). Can Washington's changing approach towards Pakistan compel it to rethink its strategy of using terrorism against India (and Afghanistan), which has had severe blowback? And, very importantly, how will Pakistan try to revive its strategic relevance?

Notes:

¹ See, "Pakistan and Pakistan-US Relations," Congressional Research Service, May 22, 2023, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2023-05-22_R47565_1e5ed81ca95d3f73b68866297150b79772ef83b2.pdf. Accessed on June 1, 2023.

² Anwar Iqbal, "US Generals express concern over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in wake of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan," *Dawn*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649127/us-generals-express-concern-over-pakistans-nuclear-arsenal-in-wake-of-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan>. Accessed on June 2, 2023.

³ Patricia Zengerle and Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken says U.S. will assess Pakistan ties over Afghanistan's future," Reuters, September 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/blinken-says-us-will-assess-pakistan-ties-over-afghanistans-future-2021-09-13/>. Accessed on June 1, 2023.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, n. 1, p. 2.

⁵ "Two day US-Pakistan Counterterrorism dialogue concludes in Pakistan," US Embassy and Consulates in Pakistan, <https://pk.usembassy.gov/two-day-u-s-pakistan-counterterrorism-dialogue-concludes-in-islamabad/>. Accessed on March 7, 2023.

⁶ "U.S. Relations with Pakistan," U.S. Department of State, August 15, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-pakistan/>. Accessed on March 7, 2023.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See, Elizabeth Horst, "The Future of US-Pakistan Relations," YouTube Video, 3:13:47, The Wilson Centre, April

27, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opwDGqcTOWE&ab_channel=WoodrowWilsonCenter. Accessed on May 12, 2023.

¹⁰ “Joint Statement from the 9th US-Pakistan TIFA Council Ministerial,” Office of the United States Trade Representative, February 23, 2023, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2023/february/joint-statement-9th-us-pakistan-tifa-council-ministerial>. Accessed on June 10, 2023.

¹¹ Horst, n. 9.

¹² “United States Pledges \$100 Million to Support Continued Flood Recovery Efforts in Pakistan,” USAID, January 9, 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jan-09-2023-united-states-pledges-100-million-support-continued-flood-recovery-efforts-pakistan>. Accessed on June 22, 2023.

¹³ “‘Nukes without any cohesion’: US President Biden terms Pakistan ‘one of the most dangerous nations,’” *The Indian Express*, October 16, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/pakistan-nuclear-weapons-most-dangerous-nations-in-the-world-joe-biden-8210160/>. Accessed on June 22, 2023.



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