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Issue Brief

US–Pakistan Equations at a Crossroads

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S*ummary*

The brief coalesces recent developments concerning US–Pakistan ties in the backdrop of American withdrawal from Afghanistan. It maps out broad contours of the bilateral ties particularly vis-à-vis Afghanistan before concluding that mutual interests are likely to keep them strategically aligned in the future as well.

The United States' long-pending exit from Afghanistan is the latest in the series of inflection points in its decades-old bilateral ties with Pakistan. Given Pakistan is looking poised to control the state of affairs in Afghanistan with the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) chief reportedly acting as a mediator between competing sections of the Taliban, speculations are now settling as facts that Pakistan is indeed calling the shots. Besides, the plum share to the Haqqani faction (once referred to as the ISI's "veritable arm" by Admiral Mike Mullen)¹ in the newly installed power structure in Kabul only reiterates Pakistan's strategic exaltation at least for the time being. Speaking on the Taliban, Rex Tillerson during his tenure as the US Secretary of State once observed: "We may not win one but neither will you."² Contrary to Tillerson's assessment, in the flux as it appears at the moment in Afghanistan, the Taliban are indeed looking triumphant and Pakistan is presiding over their victory over what PM Imran Khan considered was "shackles of slavery".³

Meanwhile, the US on the other hand, is justifying its exit as necessary and in doing so, it is calibrating to reflect the Taliban in a better light. Not too long ago, the Taliban were on the other side of the negotiating table with the US administration. By categorically blaming the ISIS-Khorasan, the administration has largely exonerated the Taliban from the ensuing violence and mayhem in Afghanistan, particularly in the Kabul airport attack in which 13 US soldiers were killed.

The ongoing regional chaos has thrown up oft-repeated albeit pertinent questions on the future course of US–Pakistan relations following decades of conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan's undisputed centrality to it. This is especially so as the Afghan flux witnesses shuffling geo-political alignments where Pakistan is now seen on other side of the fence with China, Russia and the resurgent Taliban militia—all of whom have invariably had adversarial equations with the US either in present or past.

The Run-up

US–Pakistan ties appeared to be somewhat strained in the run-up to the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021. Prime Minister Imran Khan's perceptibly exasperated speech in the National Assembly on 30 June was a precursor to an impending rough patch in the US–Pakistan ties. Khan not only attacked Pakistan's decision to join the war on terror in 2001 at the US's behest but also passionately narrated how he contested the move in the Musharraf era.⁴ Prior to this, in an Op-ed published in *The Washington Post*, Prime Minister Imran Khan noted: "If Pakistan were to agree to host

¹ **"US Admiral: 'Haqqani is Veritable Arm of Pakistan's ISI'"**, *BBC*, 22 September 2011.

² **"US Afghanistan: Tillerson Ups Pressure on Pakistan"**, *BBC*, 23 August 2017.

³ **"Afghanistan has Broken Shackles of Slavery: PM Imran Khan"**, *Geo TV*, 16 August 2021.

⁴ **"Imran Khan's Full Speech in the National Assembly"**, *Geo TV*, 30 June 2021.

US bases, from which to bomb Afghanistan, and an Afghan civil war ensued, Pakistan would be targeted for revenge by terrorists again. We simply cannot afford this. We have already paid too heavy a price.”⁵ These significant proclamations occurred just before the US exited the Bagram air base—the “centrepiece” of the war on terror marking the onset of a complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.⁶

Notwithstanding, of late, there have been frequent reciprocal official exchanges between the two sides—at the level of foreign ministers, Intelligence Chiefs, the National Security Advisors including a conversation between the Pak Army Chief and the US Defence Secretary.⁷ US Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Bill Burns, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) Director too visited Pakistan in the period leading to the August withdrawal.⁸ Despite some high-level interactions on the approaching deadline, there has been perceptible unease in the bilateral equations. Prime Minister Imran Khan observed that the US “really messed it up” in Afghanistan and that the US finds Pakistan useful in clearing up the mess in the neighbourhood.⁹

In the ongoing chaos, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin in his phone call to Pakistan Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa has “expressed his interest in continuing to improve the US-Pakistan relationship and build upon our multiple shared interests in the region.”¹⁰ However, it is worth noting that President Biden has not established a direct contact with Khan even through a critical phase when American forces were on the verge of quitting their battlefield of 20 years in which Pakistan was playing a frontline role.¹¹ National Security Advisor, Moeed Yusuf’s comments on President Biden not making a phone call to Prime Minister Imran Khan received added traction in the media circles.¹² Based on the regional undercurrents and a surrounding grim situation, a prominent political pitch voiced in Pakistan has been that US has left

⁵ **“Imran Khan: Pakistan is Ready to be a Partner for Peace in Afghanistan, But We Will Not Host U.S. Bases”**, *The Washington Post*, 21 June 2021.

⁶ Rakesh Sinha, **“Explained: Exiting Bagram & A Long War”**, *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2021.

⁷ **“NSA, ISI Chief Reach US for Talks on Afghanistan and Other Issues”**, *Dawn*, 28 July 2021.

⁸ **“C.I.A. Scrambles for New Approach in Afghanistan”**, *The New York Times*, 6 June 2021.

⁹ Islamuddin Sajid, **“Pakistani Premier Says US ‘Messed It Up in Afghanistan’”**, *Anadolu Agency*, 28 July 2021; also see, **“Pakistan Useful for US Only to Clean Up Afghanistan ‘Mess’: Khan”**, *Al Jazeera*, 12 August 2021.

¹⁰ Anwar Iqbal, **“US Wants to Continue Improving Ties, Austin tells Bajwa”**, *Dawn*, 11 August 2021.

¹¹ **“Not Waiting for Phone Call from Biden, Says PM Imran”**, *Dawn*, 12 August 2021.

¹² **“Pakistan’s Security Adviser Complains Joe Biden Has Not Called Imran Khan”**, *Financial Times*, 3 August 2021.

Afghanistan to Pakistan yet again in a repeat of the strategic desertion of the country after Soviet forces withdrew in the late 1980s.

Pakistan and Afghanistan: From Cause to Cure and Back

Pakistan's logistical uniqueness *vis-à-vis* supply routes made it the fulcrum of American Afghan scheme. Immediate proximity to Afghanistan defined US's unflinching incline towards Pakistan without which it was hard to imagine an "effective Afghan resistance".¹³ While the US had billions to support their war effort, it was the logistical wherewithal provided by Pakistan that gave the US operations a critical edge to overthrow the Soviets. Similarly, the use of Pakistani airspace in US's counter-insurgency operations has been pivotal in the war on terror during decades of association (albeit with gaps) on Afghanistan, making it a key determinant of US ties with Pakistan both in the pre and post 9/11 era. Both sides are sensitised of mutual leverages which are invariably used to tilt a favourable balance. The culture of US booties in return for Pakistan's support on Afghanistan, has deeply penetrated the Pakistani military-politico system as well.

Pakistan is the incubator of the current Afghan problem. During the 1970s through the 1980s, the Mujahideen resistance against the Soviet forces were housed and trained in Pakistan at the US's behest. Post-Soviet exit, the idle Mujahideen got educated and indoctrinated in the Saudi-funded educational institutions in the country's north. Most of those who got out of these madrassas now constitute the top brass of the contemporary Taliban. The seeds of Taliban resistance and ideology as it manifests today were, therefore, generated in Pakistan. At the commencement of the War on terror in October 2001, irrespective of its frontline status, Pakistan continued to shelter the Taliban escaping the US-led NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allied forces. This was likely known to the Bush Administration who chose to ignore in order to claim initial success. Having made major gains in neutralising the Al Qaeda (the primary adversary), the US was later pitched in a battle with a Frankenstein—the Taliban—and in doing so it was heavily relying on a country which practically nurtured this outfit.

If one analyses the underlying aim of the US policy throughout its 20-year Afghan engagement, the core principle has been to urge Pakistan to cooperate more on meeting American objectives. This has been at the expense of US overlooking/accepting Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban, and its affinities and equations with Taliban subset—the Haqqani group and other dreaded terrorist organisations. This was also because successive US administrations (at least since

¹³ Marvin G. Weinbaum, "War and Peace in Afghanistan", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Winter 1991, p. 71.

2009) were looking to bring about a sober end to their protracted intervention in Afghanistan.

It was perhaps Obama administration's desire to respectfully close the Afghan chapter that no meaningful punitive measure against Pakistan was taken even after Osama Bin Laden was found to be living near a military establishment in Abbottabad. Although a major logjam resulted after the Salala incident towards the end of 2011, ties were far from severed and a compromise/breakthrough was eventually achieved. The bitter twitter exchanges between President Trump and Pakistan Prime Minister and the former's attack on Pakistan for harbouring "agents of chaos, violence, and terror" while unveiling a new US strategy on Afghanistan in August 2017, seemed more of a ritual before the two sides reached an understanding on engaging the Taliban directly.¹⁴ Not long before, Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State announced an inter-agency policy review on US aid to Pakistan only to accede later that the US could not afford "to destabilize Islamabad" by exerting excessive pressure.¹⁵

The role of subtle pressure tactics in Pakistan eventually getting Taliban on the negotiating table under President Trump cannot be ruled out. Whatever went behind the scenes, the Doha settlement did pave a way for the Biden administration to finally execute and culminate the exit plan by 30 August 2021. It is important to understand, however, that while the Pakistani establishment may have felt/shown pursued to do so by the US, they may well also be elated at the opportunity to legitimise and empower the Taliban by putting them on an even footing with the US during the Doha negotiations.

Of Past and Future

As pointed out earlier, in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan was grappling with the after-effects of the Pressler amendment which required Presidential certification for continuing aid—economic as well as military. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush refused to certify Pakistan under "interagency recommendation" as a result of which US\$ 564 million was put to freeze.¹⁶ At this juncture, the US administration's hardened position required Pakistan to destroy its existing nuclear arsenal.¹⁷ The impact of the Pressler lash was acutely felt in Pakistan affecting its broader strategic equations with the US.

¹⁴ **"Donald Trump Warns Pakistan Against Providing Safe Havens to Terrorists: Full Text of his Speech"**, *The Indian Express*, 22 August 2017.

¹⁵ No. 2.

¹⁶ Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2001, p. 308.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

At present, the Pakistan Army chief has already expressed concerns over some kind of US sanctions in the aftermath of the Afghan mayhem.¹⁸ Hounded by shortfalls on the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) compliance, US sanctions if any, may aggravate Pakistan's prevalent economic woes. However, this time around, active involvement of Russia, China and Iran in the current geo-political scene may partially help dilute problems for Pakistan against any US-initiated contingency.

Amidst lurking uncertainties on the future course, there is a growing narrative inside Pakistan that the US must broad-base its otherwise transactional relationship with Pakistan—one that matches the nature of US ties with India. The roadmap to de-hyphenate the US–Pakistan bilateral ties from Afghanistan has become more pertinent as the US forces receded.¹⁹ Pakistan's NSA, Moeed Yusuf, recently underscored the need to expand trade and commerce between the two sides. While acknowledging the US prowess and control over global institutions, Yusuf accepted also at the same time that the US lacks the “liquidity” which China has in times when the centre of gravity has moved to Asia.²⁰ Reiterating the need for diversification of ties, Yusuf was categorical in his approach that wider cooperation in the security domain with the US will not compromise Pakistan's newly-adopted position of not providing bases for operations in Afghanistan anymore.²¹

Meanwhile after the Kabul takeover, a series of pre-emptive statements from members of the Imran Khan government are looking to prevent a situation where the blame for the Afghan debacle is thrust onto Pakistan. Minister of Human Rights, Shireen Mazari noting “enough is enough” asserts that Pakistan can no longer be scapegoated for the US failures.²² Targeting the US politics and media including those in the other NATO countries, Mazari stridently recounted Pakistan's miseries being “a country that has suffered the most, after Afghanistan, as a result of being dragged into wars that were not Pakistan's wars.”²³ Similarly, NSA Moeed Yusuf also observed that “Pakistan wants to be treated like an ally, not a scapegoat”.²⁴

¹⁸ Ayesha Siddiqa, **“Islamabad has a Problem. Taliban Won't Tone Down Now – in Afghanistan or Pakistan”**, *The Print*, 27 August, 2021.

¹⁹ **“The Next Chapter in U.S.-Pakistan Relations A Conversation with Pakistan's Ambassador to United States”**, United States Institute of Peace, 8 July 2021.

²⁰ **“Jirga with Moeed Yusuf”**, *Geo TV*, 4 July 2021.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shireen M. Mazari, **“Enough is Enough”**, *The News*, 24 August 2021 at <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/882170-enough-is-enough>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Moeed Yusuf, **“Pakistan Wants to be Treated Like an Ally, Not a Scapegoat”**, *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2021.

Economy of Strategic Partnership

US–Pakistan ties have an intrinsic tenet of dependency that has forged an economy in fostering and maintaining their strategic partnership. While US has historically banked upon the salience of Pakistan’s geo-politically relevant location, Pakistan has relied on US economic assistance—both military and non-military, and diplomatic waivers despite its reckless track record in promoting terrorism and clandestine nuclear activities. The bilateral adhesion based on give and take, exercising mutual leverages and the willingness to partner in contingencies has sustained the ties against oddities of crossing over strategic allegiance by both the US and Pakistan, *vis-à-vis* India and China respectively.

Pakistan has had few stark interests in keeping the US engaged and serve its goals in Afghanistan. Both associations with the US on Afghanistan were primarily under military regimes—Zia ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf—that wanted legitimacy and resources to keep the domestic situation under control. The US support in return for Pakistan’s services on Afghanistan, therefore, remained crucial. Similarly, sustained strategic cooperation, howsoever unfruitful it may have been, at a point drove the US to offer Pakistan a mammoth humanitarian aid assistance as envisaged under the PEACE (Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement Act) Act of 2009.

Going by this logic, therefore, the current frost is only a phase that too shall pass before the two countries huddle up for some objective. Pakistan’s geography will be an enabling factor for US’s geo-political designs in Asia—it must keep it engaged for its steadfast proximity to China, now Russia and Iran (to an extent), and the deep leverages Islamabad is likely to be armed with *vis-à-vis* the newly installed Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Even as Sino-Pakistan proximity peaked, it was not without the US consent that Pakistan was able to avail an IMF bailout of US\$ 6 billion to cope up with mounting economic distress.²⁵ In the fiscal year 2019–2020, the US was Pakistan’s top donor on budget, grant-based assistance, something that does not aggravate Pakistan’s debt burden or adversely affect the balance of payments.²⁶

Mutual Needs Will Bind

US–Pakistan relations have witnessed upheavals in the past. Irrespective of the escalatory war of words sometimes, the nature of US–Pakistan strategic relationship of convenience has remain unsurpassed in the history of US’s forays in the

²⁵ **“IMF Executive Board Approves US\$6 billion 39-Month EFF Arrangement for Pakistan”**, International Monetary Fund, Press Release No. 19/264, 3 July 2019.

²⁶ **“U.S. Assistance to Pakistan”**, Embassy Fact Sheet, U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Pakistan.

subcontinent. Years of American engagement in Afghanistan is replete with admonitions against Pakistan—from certifications to earn US assistance being subjected to doing “enough” to contain terrorism, to calling it out for “harbouring snakes in its backyard”—the US administrations have struggled to keep or at least seen to be keeping Pakistan on a leash. One has to wait for the situation in Afghanistan to further crystallise to be able to gauge an unlikely change in contour of the bilateral ties, if at all it occurs.

There are two ways to view the US–Pakistan ties against the present backdrop. First, whether the two sides need to take a step back and think in terms of “what next” after Afghanistan? Whether the bilateral ties indeed need a fresh outlook or a framework to sustain and nurture the relations? Secondly, this could be the onset of a deliberate temporary pause so as to let the dust settle down in Afghanistan—until then, Pakistan is deputed to take control of the situation in Afghanistan in order to ensure that things there do not shape up in a manner that further hurts US interests. Third possibility is that the US actually deserts Pakistan allowing it to fully embrace its regional adversaries—Russia, China and Iran.

History suggests that the resilience of the US–Pakistan old-time ties shall prevail, governed by reflexes that will find some converging interests to forge forth with. Be that as it may, the widespread apprehension that the US has left Afghanistan on Pakistan somewhat resonates with the present reality. The Taliban government formalised soon after ISI chief Faiz Hameed’s visit to Kabul, and this important visit coincided with the reported fall of the last anti-Taliban redoubt, the Panjshir Valley.

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