

The Current Dynamics of Pakistan-US Relationship: Morphing from Being a Strategic Alliance to Transactional Relationship (An Overview)

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Abstract

There is no permanent enemy and friend in an international politics, only national interest plays the pivotal role. The relationship between Pakistan-United States have been asymmetric and multifaceted. Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the relationship of Pakistan and United States has experienced many ebbs and flows. The relationship between these two unequal partners are based on divergent mutual perception. The main objectives of the research paper will be to analyse the factors of fluctuation of United States-Pakistan relations in different periods. In this research paper analytical and qualitative methodology will be applied to gauge the Pakistan-United States relations. The geo-political approach will be applied to assess transactional relations between two countries. The data collection will be based on primary and secondary sources i.e books, journals, interviews and newspapers etc. The reason behind this up and down relationship between these two nations are difference of attitude by the United States towards Pakistan at different times and occasions. As a matter of fact, the United States only helped Pakistan when its services were required for the fulfillment of its objectives in the region of South Asia and Southwest Asia. On the other hand, in this uneasy marriage which has further strained, there is no option of divorce for either nations despite growing estrangement. Breaking the relationship will go against both the nations. In order to extricate from Afghan quagmire, the United States require the vital support of Pakistan. Thus, despite the mistrust between these two countries, there is also a realisation that a complete break down of relationship between Islamabad and Washington will be in nobody's interest.

The present paper is an attempt to evaluate the factors responsible for bringing Pakistan and the US as a short term strategic allies at different occasions. Besides, the paper will also evaluate the main reason for shifting this strategic alliance between Pakistan and the United States into a transactional relationship. In the end, the vital strategies will be

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recommended for the improvement of relations between Pakistan and the United States.

Key words:

Pakistan-US relations, India, Afghanistan, Strategic alliance, transactional relationship.

Historical Summary

Pakistan came into being as an independent state in 1947 in the violence of partition making India its most immediate and powerful threat. This insecurity drove Pakistan's search for allies and a position in world politics which were dominated by the emerging Cold War. These influences compelled Pakistan to abandon its original ideals of neutrality and Muslim solidarity, and to seek security through alignment with the US.

US interest in South Asia came from its strategy of containing the USSR to prevent communist expansion towards the Middle East and, later, to also contain China (Cheema, 1990:136). . After being rejected by India in 1949, which chose a non-aligned policy, it took another five years for the US to turn to Pakistan as its regional partner. Under the 1954 Mutual Defence Pact, Pakistan joined the US alliance system, receiving military aid in return for access to bases and military co-operation. However, the primary aims of the two states did not align. Whilst the US was arming Pakistan against the USSR, Pakistan's prime concern was India and a resolution of the Kashmir issue. These misaligned aims underlay the relationship from the start and contributed to its brittle and fluctuating quality.

Despite this, the alignment was stable up to the early 1960s. Pakistan joined other US-led regional alliances, SEATO and CENTO, and was recognised as a key US ally (Burke, 1973:171). It received large amounts of military aid in return and the US turned a blind eye when the military ousted the elected civilian government in October 1959. Differences surfaced, however, when the US armed India in its 1962 border dispute with China and they came to a head when Pakistan's military aid was withdrawn in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Bitterly disappointed that the US had not supported it against India, Pakistan turned to China for alternative arms supplies (Reidal, 2010:14), but remained a member of the US-led alliances.

By 1970, Pakistan's connection with Beijing was used by Washington as part of its triangular diplomacy which involved improving relations with China and deliberately worrying the USSR in the process (Sharma, 1999:93). At the same time, East Pakistan was breaking away from West Pakistan resulting in brutal repression, to which the US again turned a blind eye.

However, the US did not intervene to prevent East Pakistan's secession, which was won with Indian military help, though it did deter India from threatening West Pakistan. Pakistan again felt betrayed and diversified its foreign policy towards Islamic states and China, without again breaking off its relations with Washington.

India's 1974 nuclear test prompted Pakistan to accelerate its own nuclear programme, against the non-proliferation aims of the US. This created severe tension culminating in suspension of aid and Pakistan's withdrawal from CENTO (Arif, 1984: 346). In contrast to America's response to the earlier military take-over, General Zia's coup in July 1977 and the subsequent repression drew severe human rights criticism from the Carter administration. With US-Pakistan relations at a low ebb, the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and these concerns were put to one side as the US attempted to regain Pakistan as a close ally. Initially refusing Carter's offer, Zia used his country's geo-strategic value to negotiate a better aid package from the Reagan administration and then helped to arm the Mujahidin in a proxy war against the USSR (Malik, 2001:361). In this, the US aim was to weaken and expel the USSR from Afghanistan. Pakistan shared this latter aim, but also wanted a sympathetic successor regime in Kabul which would allow military strategic depth against India and not incite nationalist sentiment in the border regions. The US was not particularly interested in these concerns of Pakistan.

Pakistan's nuclear programme continued throughout this period without noticeably affecting relations with Washington. However, when the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 this concern over nuclear proliferation led to the US suspending aid once more, despite Pakistan's reversion to democratic government. Islamic terrorism was another issue between the two countries when the US accused Pakistan of sponsoring terrorists in Kashmir and Bosnia. In the Afghan civil wars, which followed the Soviet collapse, Islamabad sponsored the pro-Pakistan Taliban (Bassiouni, 2008:40). Eager for access to new gas fields in Central Asia, and to contain Iranian influence, the US initially joined Saudi Arabia in financing Taliban support. However, deteriorating human rights, drug trafficking and support for al-Qaeda made the US distance itself from the Taliban and criticise Pakistan over its sponsorship of them. In 1998, Pakistan responded to India's nuclear tests with tests of its own, resulting in another US aid embargo (Fry, 2013:136). Musharraf's 1999 military coup drew additional sanctions.

It was in this period that the 9/11 incident occurred. Embargos and sanctions were once again lifted and the US gave Pakistan a \$2.64bn aid package in return for joining Washington in clearing al-Qaeda and the Taliban from Afghanistan. In 2004, Pakistan was declared a major non-

NATO ally of the US but, here also, aims were not aligned. The US wanted to destroy al-Qaeda and their Taliban hosts but still did not share Islamabad's hope for a pro-Pakistan regime in their place. Pakistan was pressured by the US to abandon the Taliban, and India-friendly factions took Kabul and became prominent in government.

To escape the US military, the Taliban and other militant groups moved to the Pakistan border areas from where they attacked NATO in Afghanistan and created potential for instability in Pakistan itself. Under US pressure, the Pakistan military attacked those groups and this caused resentment and violence inside the country. Frustrated with the lack of progress, and suspicious of Pakistani collusion, the US also attacked those areas with drones, adding anti-American feeling to the existing resentment of the Pakistan military. Trust had broken down to such an extent that when the US found Osama binLaden on Pakistani territory in 2011 they mounted a military operation to kill him without even consulting Islamabad. Later the same year, NATO destroyed a military base at Salala killing 24 Pakistani soldiers (BBC News, 2011). In retaliation Pakistan blocked NATO access to Afghanistan which was not reopened until 2012 when Hillary Clinton issued her rather half-hearted apology which was referred to earlier. Despite all these problems, relations never broke down completely and the US continued to give aid to the Pakistan military.

CURRENT PAKISTAN-US RELATIONSHIP:

Recently the former Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Asif said there is a "huge trust deficit" between Pakistan and the US (Kermani, 2017). This statement suggests that little has changed in US-Pakistan relations and the pattern of relations has become well set over sixty-five years and shows little sign of changing. Based on fundamental interests which diverge and sometimes conflict, it has been formed and re-formed through expedient opportunism and wilful blindness with an accumulated deficit of trust and mutual antipathy. It is resentfully held together by mutual reliance for non-mutual ends.

In 1962 Pakistan felt let down by the US support for India in its border war with China and the US felt let down by Pakistan's subsequent turn to China and development of nuclear weapons. The trust deficit grew in a cycle of on-off relations dominated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, embargos and sanctions over nuclear weapons and human rights, the War on Terror and the US occupation of Afghanistan. It now focusses on US allegations of Pakistan's duplicity in protecting Afghan terrorists whilst also claiming to be Washington's allies and receiving its support.

As in the past, a new US administration has stirred up contradictions. When Trump was elected last year he inherited a legacy of disputes not just about harbouring terrorists but also about US demands for the release of Shakil Afridi (the doctor who helped lead the CIA to Osama bin Laden); (Gul, 2012:26) the withholding of \$300m reimbursements to the Pakistani army; and barriers to letting Islamabad buy F16 fighter jets. In addition there were worries that Trump's business interests might lead him to favour India. Nevertheless, just after his election Trump spoke to then PM Nawaz Sharif and gave cause to believe he might bring a more constructive approach. He was reported as telling the PM, "You are doing amazing work which is visible in every way." and, "Your country is amazing with tremendous opportunities. Pakistanis are one of the most intelligent people." In what must have been interpreted as an offer to help over escalating tensions with India in Kashmir at that time he was reported to have added, "I am ready and willing to play any role that you want me to play to address and find solutions to the outstanding problems." (*The Guardian*, 1st December, 2016). However, eight months later there was a now familiar turn-around in rhetoric when Trump told his nation about his new strategy for Afghanistan (which was a reversal of his predecessor's and reverted to increasing US engagement with an unspecified number of soldiers, an unspecified timetable and an unspecified objective). One part of the strategy which was not new was blame for, and threats to, Pakistan: "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organisations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond." While acknowledging America's strong relations with Pakistan and its sacrifices to terrorism, Trump said Pakistan would be a "pillar" of his strategy and it would have "much to lose" if it did not comply. (*The Guardian*, 22nd August, 2017). Aggravating an other sore for Pakistan he said he would encourage [India](#) to play more of a role.

In relation to this there have been some familiar responses from Pakistan. A senior Pakistani intelligence official was reported saying: "Pakistan itself is the victim of terrorism. We are fighting militants and have conducted many ground and aerial operations and destroyed their sanctuaries. We want to eradicate them physically and ideologically." (*The Guardian*, 22nd August, 2017) Going a step further Naeem Khalid Lodhi, a defence analyst and retired general, said the US was to blame for its own failures in Afghanistan and, "They are shifting blame to Pakistan. Pakistan should not remain silent against such US behaviour and we should work to build a new political and strategical bloc with big powers like Russia and China." In a more measured response Khwaja Asif insisted there are no "safe havens" in Pakistan and pointed out that, "They do not need our territory any more.

Almost 40% of Afghan territory is now under the direct control of the Taliban” (Kermani, 2017) This claim has greater credibility now that the US itself estimates that Afghan government forces control less than 60% of territory (*The Guardian*, 22 August, 2017) and it demonstrates that conditions have changed and that Trump has less leverage to force any of the regional states to do his will. Khwaja Asif also pointed to another factor reducing US influence when he claimed that Pakistan only received a trickle of economic assistance from Washington, “We do not get any military hardware from them. We are not like in the past when we were their proxy.” (Kermani, 2017). Linked to this Trump is also faced with growing Chinese influence in the region and in Pakistan in particular, notably through over \$50 billion investment associated with CPEC (Kiani, 2016).

Trump’s actions look muddled. There is nothing in his new Afghan “fight to win” strategy which has not been tried before and failed to decisively win. The record of the last 16 years shows that the Taliban and other anti-US groups can survive military force and that, in any case, Washington cannot be relied upon to maintain a consistent long-term strategy which will outlast the Taliban’s. There is a possibility that Trump may be aiming to make some short-term impact to be able to negotiate with the Taliban from a position of greater strength. This would be consistent with his “deal-maker” approach and he hinted at it in his speech, “Someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan” (*Dawn*, 22 August, 2017). However, the resources he appears to be committing do not make this strategy a “surge”, like the one in Iraq, which will seriously deplete the Taliban and push them into such a position and, in any case, the Taliban have shown no indication that they would negotiate from a position of weakness themselves. The situation most likely to motivate the parties to a negotiated settlement is an acceptance that a stalemate has been reached from which neither can win. Thus, without any clear military objective, Trump’s approach risks escalation and mission-creep which such open-ended strategies are prone to.

Blaming Pakistan is nothing new but the circumstances in which it is being done have changed. Pakistan is less reliant on the US but the US is still reliant on Pakistan for land and air access to Afghanistan, for co-operation in the border regions and for intelligence sharing. Notably, though, the US cannot afford to let Pakistan become unstable because of the risks over who might get access to its nuclear arsenal. Against this background, therefore, it is unclear exactly what “getting tough” with Pakistan could entail. Military aid is limited and economic investment is dwarfed by China. Military action would alienate an already unsympathetic population and could alter the

whole balance of power in the region further against the US. So, it is not clear how Trump would make good on his threat without inflicting harm on his own national interests.

Another change has been the increasing involvement in Afghanistan of other regional powers to fill the void left by the US withdrawal under Obama. This has allowed the Taliban to diversify its sources of support, especially since the emergence of Islamic State. In addition to Pakistan there is evidence that Russia, Iran, China and Saudi Arabia are all seeking influence with the Taliban. There is also evidence that Russia is allegedly supplying weapons and cash not just to the Taliban but also to local strongmen in northern Afghanistan causing further destabilisation (*The Guardian*, 22 October, 2017) Just as Pakistan protects its interests against India in Afghanistan so too these other states seek to protect their interests there against unacceptable Islamic groups or other rival states. So, picking out Pakistan as the main culprit seems both unfair and counter-productive, particularly as the proportion of Afghan terrorists sheltering in Pakistan is small, as you have identified.

However, Washington's continued blaming of Pakistan serves an important purpose for them: it creates a narrative acceptable to the domestic audience that the US military is not responsible for its failures. In this sense it protects the military and successive administrations from criticism. But this is likely to be counter-productive to wider US interests particularly in relation to China in that it will bring Beijing and Islamabad even closer together as allies.

Trump potentially alienated Pakistan further with his claim that he would encourage India to play more of a role in Afghanistan. This could also be counter-productive since it is the fear of a greater Indian presence there that motivates Pakistan's backing for Afghan militants, as a buffer against their regional enemy's influence. So, greater Indian influence will encourage greater Pakistani support for these groups. Not only will this alarm Islamabad but it will also concern China as a rival of India and with large investments and strategic interests in the region. This will further strengthen the convergence of interests between Pakistan and China and highlight the divergence of interests between Pakistan and the US.

Having created that situation it is by no means clear that India will back up Trump in the way he wants. Ajai Shukla, a writer on Indian strategic affairs claims, "Trump is ahead of Indian policy on this....with the situation in Doklam, and Kashmir on fire again....India is in no position to respond with sizable troop numbers in Afghanistan" (*The Guardian*, 22 August, 2017) Even if Trump is only looking for increased economic assistance it may not be forthcoming according to NandanUnnikrishnan, vice-president of the

Observer Research Foundation, “I don’t know how India is going to do that..... India has its own economic challenges for a variety of reasons, including demonetisation. And our economic growth is also forecast to slow down this year” (*The Guardian*, 22 August, 2017) India has a long history of knowing that the US desperately wants to be its premier regional ally yet holding Washington at arm’s length and maintaining its independence of strategy and action. Modi is an Indian nationalist and will not allow his country to be manipulated by the US, and if Trump thinks he can solve his regional problems by mediating a solution in Kashmir he can forget it. India has not and will not accept external interference in this dispute, as Hilary Clinton and President Obama found out.

Thus, Trump appears to have stirred up regional fears and escalated tensions without creating the prospect of furthering US interests in any clear way. Pakistan, however, now has genuine options for hedging against the US by increasing its partnership with the rising World power that is China. As General Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor(Inter-Services Public Relations Director) told reporters, referring to Trump's decision, “Let it come... Even if it comes... Pakistan shall do whatever is best in the national interest ” (*Dawn*, 22 August, 2017). As with all Trump policies, however, it remains to be seen whether he will stick to it or change his mind again. After all it was only a little over a year ago that he was arguing for a withdrawal from Afghanistan and telling Nawaz Sharif what amazing work Pakistan was doing.

On 1st January 2018, the US President Trump accused Pakistan of deceiving the United States while receiving billion of dollars in aid. This statement invited a series of response from Pakistan which further deteriorated the relationship. In his tweet he stated that the US has foolishly given more than \$33 billion in aid for the last 15 years but Pakistan in response gives only lies and deceit to the US. He further accused Pakistan of giving safe haven to the terrorists the US hunt in Afghanistan (Aziz, 2018). On the same day of Trump’s tweet, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Kawaja Asif in an interview to a private Pakistani channel said that Pakistan has already said no more to the US and therefore, Trumps no more is of no importance to Pakistan. Again on 3rd January 2018, Kawaja Asif, in response to the US President Trump’s aggressive speeches against Pakistan, reminded the US administration through a series of tweets the services which Pakistan had rendered to the US particularly during the war against terror. In those tweets he addressed the US that history taught Pakistan not to blindly trust the US. A dictator (Musharraf) surrendered to the US in a single phone call. Pakistan witnessed a worst bloodshed, the US carried 57,800 attacks on Afghanistan from Pakistani bases. He further said that from soil of Pakistan, the US forces were supplied the arms and explosives. Thousands of Pakistani

civilians and military soldiers became the victim of war which was initiated by the US (Iqbal, 2018). Pakistani leaders also responded by saying that that Pakistan has been made a scapegoat for their failure in fghanistan.

Conclusion

The balance of gains from the relationship appears to strongly favour the US but there is little indication that Pakistan will give up on it in the foreseeable future. Despite American frustrations, the US would be unwise to abandon Pakistan as it did in the past since many of the circumstances favouring reverse influence will remain even after a partial withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The relationship between Pakistan and the US is not a strategic relationship but it was primarily a transactional relationship. There should be a rational, open approach in which both the nations must know what the expectations are. They must also seek to identify the areas where they can work together and try to isolate the areas where they cannot work together and promote those where understanding can be reached. Further, it is better for Pakistan to stop competing with the US-India relationship which, difficult though it might be to swallow, had actually now acquired a strategic dimension which is likely to be further intensified. Therefore, Pakistan should recognise the realities of diverging interests, accept the realities of US regional strategy and advocate a negotiated approach to transactional co-operation within these limits. It is an approach which has not often been present in the relationship and would require a considerable re-orientation of attitudes on both sides.

On the US side there have been two tensions in policy towards Pakistan which have bred instability in the relationship in addition to that caused by the underlying divergence of interests. First was the tension between wanting India as first choice for regional partner but needing Pakistan because of regional geo-politics. This led to a double game in which the US kept its India options open whilst engaging Pakistan and ultimately facilitated greater Indian influence in Afghanistan. In the Cold War it appeared Democrats favoured India while Republicans favoured Pakistan, but as India grew in power and significance this became a general preference for India. However, Washington's continued reliance on Pakistan will impede relations with India and its continued espousal of India will reinforce distrust in Pakistan. The second tension was between the promotion of liberal values and nuclear non-proliferation on the one hand, and support for illiberal regimes and tolerance of nuclear proliferation in pursuit of realist power politics on the other. In the case of Pakistan this led to sharp oscillations of

policy and an expectation of mistrust. Unless the US can find a way of at least smoothing the change from one policy phase to the next this will remain a problem for the relationship. However, the legacy of mistrust and of popular anti-US and anti-Pakistan sentiment in each nation makes this even more difficult.

It would be rewarding to conclude that the history of US-Pakistan relations contains optimistic indications of how they might be put on a more constructive level. However, the pattern of relations has become well set over 70 years and shows little sign of changing. Based on fundamental interests which diverge and sometimes conflict, it has been formed and re-formed through an accumulated deficit of trust and mutual antipathy. It is resentfully held together by mutual reliance for non-mutual ends. The military-dominated Pakistani elite relies on US money and arms to confront India and to maintain state integrity. The US relies on them for access to and use of their geo-strategic location and intelligence and for keeping their nuclear arsenal safe from American enemies. Thus, despite a massive power disparity between the two states, Pakistan has been able to exert considerable reverse influence on the US to keep the money and arms coming. To change this pattern would require considerable institutional and popular changes in attitudes which are well engrained. Obama's failed attempt to turn a new page in 2008 illustrates how difficult such change was to make. This suggests more of the same, unless and until an external shock shakes regional relationships into a new configuration.

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