

## **US-Pakistan Relations since 2011: An Analysis of Challenges and Prospects**

**By Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry<sup>1</sup>**

### Historical Overview

A day after Pakistan appeared on the map of the world as an independent state on August 14, 1947, the United States announced its formal recognition of the new state, and President Harry Truman sent a congratulatory message to M. A. Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan, fondly referred to in Pakistan as the Quaid-e-Azam. Jinnah reciprocated the greetings with his own goodwill message. These messages were not just symbolic, but also reflected a desire on the part of Pakistani leadership to have strong relations with the US, mainly because of the circumstances in which Pakistan was born and the pre-eminence that the US had acquired after the Second World War.

When Pakistan started its national life, there was no state infrastructure in place and statecraft had to be constructed from the scratch. Some of the Indian leaders were convinced that Pakistan would not be able to survive and created hurdles for Pakistan to acquire its share of currency reserve, military stores, and other assets. The stoppage of canal water flowing from the headworks in eastern Punjab on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1948, though only for one month, deepened the mistrust. To make matters worse, Kashmir dispute erupted after the maharaja of Kashmir decided to accede to India in violation of the partition plan, which required Muslim majority states contiguous to the territories comprising Pakistan, like Jammu and Kashmir, to join Pakistan. The most pressing issue for the government of the nascent state was to settle millions of destitute refugees pouring in from India.

The cumulative effect for the new state was a deep sense of insecurity, which then led to a quest for finding partner countries that Pakistan could rely on for security and economic assistance. The US had emerged as a super power from the Second World War, and was an obvious choice for Pakistan to look towards. Thus started a partnership that, despite its ups and downs, has maintained a broad spectrum of cooperation from education and agriculture to defense and information technology. The people of the two countries have always remained connected even during the periods when the two governments were estranged.

In the past seventy-five years, the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and the US witnessed three turning points which led to sharp surges in bilateral exchanges and cooperation. However, each of these three turning points, discussed below, ended on a sour note because there was a mismatch of expectations from each other. A relationship that started with much hope became a victim of geopolitics and mutual mistrust.

### First turning point:

The first turning point came early on in Pakistan's life when the country's leadership leaned on the US for military and economic assistance. Although, the Pakistani leaders wanted to keep out of big-power politics, there was a growing apprehension about the ideology of communism. As part of a growing affinity with America, Prime Minister Liaqat Ali Khan visited the United States in 1950. A few years later, as a demonstration of the desire to contribute to the collective security system that was being built by the democratic world, Pakistan joined the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, and Baghdad Pact, later named as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955. Pakistan, thus, became a

---

<sup>1</sup> The writer is a former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan and author of 'Diplomatic Footprints'. He also headed a premier think tank in Islamabad.

partner of the US in its Cold War with the communist regime of the Soviet Union. In return, Pakistan received considerable military supplies and economic assistance.

There were however, costs of over-dependence on America, manifested in growing tensions with India, political disruptions at home, misgivings with the Muslim world, and bitterness with Afghanistan which relied for assistance and transit facilities on the Soviet Union. Things came to a head during the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. The US stopped military aid to both India and Pakistan on the grounds that the arms it had supplied were not meant for aggression against another state but were to be used only in self-defense. Confused, the people of Pakistan found it hard to understand why an ally and friend would not help Pakistan in time of need. A mistrust began to set in. Then came the 1971 war, when East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan and became Bangladesh. Pakistan had helped the US reach out to China during 1970, but did not receive much assurance or support against what Pakistan believed was Indian military intervention in East Pakistan.

#### Second turning point:

The second turning point in the bilateral relationship came when the Soviet Union sent its forces into Afghanistan in December 1979. For the US, the Soviets had to be pushed back and Pakistan was most suited to play that role. For Pakistan, there was an apprehension that if the Soviets were not pushed out of Afghanistan, their next stop might be Pakistan in order to reach the warm waters of Indian Ocean. The US and Pakistan, thus, cobbled together what came to be known as the Afghan jihad. After a protracted fight with the Mujahideen, the Soviet forces decided to leave Afghanistan in 1988. Soon thereafter, Americans, too, disengaged from the area, leaving behind an enormous excess baggage for Pakistan to handle: millions of Afghan refugees, the in-fighting of Afghan Mujahideen, and a Kalashnikov culture. On top of it, the US invoked in 1990 the Pressler Amendment which required stopping assistance to Pakistan on the suspicion that Pakistan was producing a nuclear weapon. The mutual trust dipped down sharply.

The decade of 1990s witnessed three notable developments in Pakistan. In 1990, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to liberalize Pakistan's economy. Second, the power tussle between the two leading parties of Pakistan did not allow any one government to complete its five-year term. The political instability, thus, disrupted economic growth and did not allow the people of Pakistan to benefit fully from economic liberalization. Third, the US sanctions obliged Pakistan to look for other ways to achieve self-sufficiency in defense. Pakistan also expedited its nuclear program. Once the Indians decided to conduct nuclear tests on 11 May 1998, Pakistan also followed suit and carried out nuclear testing on 28 May. The nuclearization of South Asia helped Pakistan gain more confidence that its conventional asymmetry with India had now been addressed by the country's nuclear capability. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as the dominant force in 1996 and established an Islamic Emirate.

#### Third turning point:

The third turning point in the relationship came with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, often referred to as 9/11. The US launched a Global War on Terror (GWOT), and required, once again, Pakistan's help. While on the first two turning points in the 1950s and 1980s, Pakistan willingly allied with the US, this time, the alliance was imposed on Pakistan. Given the emotions that 9/11 had evoked in the US, Pakistan was warned that either "you are with us or you are with the terrorists".

Holding Al-Qaeda responsible for the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US gave an ultimatum to the Taliban regime to handover the leadership of Al-Qaeda (AQ), which had taken refuge in Afghanistan. When the

Taliban refused, the US attacked Afghanistan. The AQ and the Taliban went into hiding. In a massive manhunt for Osama bin Laden, the AQ leader, the US bombed the mountains of Tora Bora. That caused many of the terrorists to trickle into Pakistan's tribal areas. For the next two decades, Pakistan lost thousands of lives of its citizens and law enforcement authorities and suffered billions of US dollars' worth of economic losses, but it persevered and managed to defeat the forces of terrorism that had taken roots inside Pakistan. Pakistan also cooperated with its obligations under three global sanctions regimes that were instituted by the UN Security Council's Resolutions 1267, 1373 and 1504.

The irony was that despite all this sacrifice, the US expected Pakistan to "do more" in order to help the US win its war. The US did win against AQ as Pakistan helped to capture hundreds of AQ operatives. Having decimated the bulk of AQ leadership and hideouts, it was expected that the US would wind down its GWOT and retrieve its troops from Afghanistan. However, the US decided to stay on and defeat the Taliban, and expected Pakistan to pressurize the Taliban so that the US could declare victory in its war in Afghanistan. Pakistan advised the US to pursue a political approach rather than a military victory. The US did come along that path, though belatedly, and started negotiating with the Taliban culminating in an agreement that paved the ground for the return of the US troops from Afghanistan. During all this time, the US continued to harbor a feeling that Pakistan had not helped it enough. For its part, Pakistan, too, felt that the US was once again engaged in a transactional relationship with Pakistan rather than a broad strategic partnership.

#### Post-2011 turbulence:

As the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century drew to a close, the US was getting frustrated because of a lingering lack of success in its war in Afghanistan. The US held Pakistan responsible for this failure alleging that the Taliban and Haqqanis enjoyed safe-havens in Pakistan. The US opted to follow a typical stick and carrot approach. For the 'stick' prong, President Obama decided to go for a surge of US troops in Afghanistan to achieve a decisive victory against the Taliban. Pakistan was also urged, publicly and repeatedly, to "do more" to apprehend the Taliban leadership. A new term, 'Af-Pak' was coined to treat the situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan as one theatre of war. The second prong, the so-called 'carrot' was to enhance non-military assistance to Pakistan to be able to influence Pakistan's policies and to enable it to fight terrorist elements on its side of the border. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act committed US\$ 1.5 billion per year for the five-year period of 2010-14. A strategic dialogue also started with its six working groups to promote bilateral cooperation. The US also would reimburse much of the costs that Pakistan had to incur in its fight against the militants and terrorists through a program called Coalition Support Fund.

The year 2011 tested the nerves of both countries as a series of incidents brought the relationship under great stress. First came the Raymond Davis episode. Raymond killed two men in Lahore in broad daylight. Posing as a diplomat, he managed to exit the country through an arranged judicial process. The then foreign minister of Pakistan resigned in protest. In May, 2011, the American forces carried out a secret surgical operation to kill Osama bin Laden, allegedly hiding in a house in Abbottabad. A heated debate began in the media the world over as to how Osama managed to live there for so long without getting detected. The New York Times in its editorial of 13 May 2011 described Pakistan as a "faithless ally". In Pakistan, the government was under pressure from the people who wanted to know why the US, an ally, had violated Pakistan's sovereignty. Before the year ended, the US-led NATO helicopters conducted an attack on a Pakistani check post in Salalah near Pakistan-Afghanistan border and killed a number of soldiers. Pakistan reacted by demanding an apology and closed the border for the supplies to NATO forces in Afghanistan. It was a difficult year for the relationship.

It took both countries several months to overcome the turbulence in relations caused by the events of 2011. Meanwhile, Pakistan's fight with terrorist elements had continued. After an operation in Swat, Pakistani forces cleared South Waziristan from militants in 2012. But the real challenge was North Waziristan. In 2013, a new government was elected into office in Pakistan. The US and Pakistan decided to use the opportunity to revitalize the relationship. The strategic dialogue was resumed, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was invited to visit the US. Working groups also began to hold discussions for cooperation in a wide range of subjects, including energy, trade, investment, education and counter terrorism. In June 2014, Pakistan launched the military operation Zarb-e-Azb against the militants holed up in North Waziristan.

While the US was appreciative of Pakistan's efforts to defeat terrorist elements inside Pakistan, and had also resumed the bilateral strategic dialogue across a broad area of cooperation, it remained apprehensive of what it perceived was Pakistan's lack of will to target the Taliban. Pakistan's perspective that this could bring war into Pakistan and destabilize the whole region did not find sympathetic ears in the US. By this time, the US had reached the conclusion that its prolonged stay in Afghanistan had reached a point of diminishing returns. The US decided to draw down its forces in Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

Apart from the Afghanistan issue, nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear security attracted considerable attention in the US-Pakistan dialogue at that time. President Obama had started a process of nuclear security summits every two years, in which Pakistan decided to participate actively. The American view was that nuclear security must be paid highest attention lest any fissile material lands in the wrong hands, such as terrorists. The US also wanted to finalize a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) to counter nuclear proliferation. The concerned experts from both countries would engage frequently to discuss strategic stability, security and nuclear non-proliferation.

It was encouraging that the US had begun to recognize the rationale of Pakistan's security concerns. However, the US wanted Pakistan to not develop nuclear weapons and their delivery systems beyond the ranges already achieved. While Pakistan fully engaged with the US on these nuclear issues, it was not ready to compromise on its deterrence capabilities against India, which was trying to dent Pakistan's nuclear deterrence by offensive war-fighting doctrines such as the Cold Start (a rapid incursion into Pakistani territory and pull back keeping the conflict below the nuclear overhang). Pakistan's low yield, short range missiles were aimed at plugging the gap in its nuclear deterrence. The Pakistani leadership was cognizant of the need to avoid an arms race, and only wished to have flexibility in its options to ensure the credibility of its nuclear deterrence.

### Impact of global geopolitics

Since the dawn of the new Century, global geopolitics has also evolved rapidly, pushing the prevailing world order into disarray. With several countries staking greater role on the global stage, the world has become multipolar. Following the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, and Russian invasion to capture Crimea in 2014, unilateralism has been rising. Multilateralism appears to be on the retreat on peace and security issues. Xenophobia is also on the rise. The most defining feature of the evolving geopolitics, however, is the intensifying competition between the US and China. The US, which had announced its policy pivot towards Asia as early as 2011, went on to declare in its December 2017 US national security strategy, "major power strategic competition with China and Russia" as a high priority for the US. Since then, an Indo-Pacific Strategy has been evolved, essentially aimed at counter-balancing China. The Strategy coopted India as a preferred partner for the US. In another grouping called QUAD, the US, India, Japan, and Australia came together, ostensibly to contribute towards a free and open Indo Pacific.

There is a concern that the world might be headed towards camp politics and a new Cold War could start. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and West's sanctions against Russia, triggering energy and grain crises, have also infused further uncertainty to the evolving world order. Several other challenges have also emerged as common threat to the humanity, such as climate change, food insecurity, communicable diseases, energy shortages, and inflation, all of which are mentioned in the US national security strategy of October 2022. The Middle East is also changing with new alignments emerging, particularly the growing role of China. Arab-Israel rapprochement is also under way. While all this is impacting US-Pakistan relations, the relationship is most affected by the developments in South Asia, where alignments are sharpening. Both, the US tilt towards India and China's close cooperation with Pakistan, need to be looked at closely in order to understand the impact on US-Pakistan relations.

#### The China factor:

China has been a steady friend of Pakistan. Ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two in 1951, both have conducted bilateral relations in accord with the established principles of good neighborliness. Notably, they have never interfered in each other's internal affairs. On international forums, China has always shown a sound understanding of Pakistan's perspectives. Since 2015, with the launch of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the bilateral relationship has assumed further substance and depth.

While relations with China have steadily grown and become a corner stone for Pakistan's foreign policy, the country is not viewed as a replacement of Pakistan's ties with the US. Pakistan helped in connecting the two powers in the early 1970s, and considers itself as a continuing bridge between the two. The people of Pakistan were disappointed when the US officials expressed concern about CPEC, implying that Chinese loans were a kind of debt trap. Pakistan has had sustained periods of close engagement with the US, and does not wish to see these two important relations become a zero sum for Pakistan.

Like many other nations in the world, Pakistan also does not wish to see the ongoing competition between the US and China morph into another Cold War. There are indications now that both powers do not wish to escalate the competition to a world divided into American or Chinese camps. President Xi and President Biden, who met in Bali in November 2022, assured the world that there would not be a Cold War between the two. The US and Europe are no longer speaking of "de-coupling" their economies from China, and want to focus on what is described as "de-risking".

While the US has created an elaborate Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) to team up with allies in the Asia Pacific to contain the growing influence of China, the Chinese have used their economic muscle, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to extend their global influence. The competition is now entering into a kind of technology war. The US has created incentives to ramp up semiconductor manufacturing in America and bring supply chains back to the US. The US is also leaning on its Asian friends to join the "tech-fight" against China. These countries want America to continue as guarantor of security in the Indo Pacific region, but they have deep economic ties with China which they are reluctant to rupture.

The European Union is also considering ways to participate in the IPS. However, the EU does not seem to be prepared to de-couple from the Chinese economy. The EU and China are each other's large trading partners. For supply of rare earths and other critical raw materials, the EU relies on China. Chinese companies own or have stakes in a wide range of European critical infrastructure. Accordingly, Europe, too, is thinking of de-risking rather than de-coupling from the Chinese economy.

The world today has become more complex, where confrontation and cooperation co-exist between any various entities. China has strong economic and commercial relations with the US and the EU despite the intense US-China competition. India is engaged with both Russia and China despite being a partner of the US in its IPS. It, therefore, makes a perfect case for Pakistan to work with the US on mutually beneficial economic issues while staying close to China. There is no either/or. The first phase of CPEC focused on energy and infrastructure. For the second phase, Pakistan needs to expedite special economic zones where industries could be set up. It would be in Pakistan's interest to offer to the US a package similar to CPEC. Pakistan must also invite investments from the US alongside China in the economic zones that the government is in the process of setting up.

The US has recently taken steps on its relations with Taiwan, which China finds provocative given its clearly pronounced One-China policy. If a crisis erupts on the Taiwan issue, there could be a difficult situation for all countries of the region as well as the friends of both countries. In the larger interest of peace in that region, the US would be well advised to respect the One-China policy that it (the US) itself adheres.

#### The India Factor:

The events of 9/11 brought the areas of Middle East and South Asia under sharp American focus. In the name of the Global War on Terror, the US first invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to eliminate AQ, and then Iraq in 2003 on suspicion of possessing weapons of mass destruction. India found an opportunity to project itself as a victim of "Islamist" terrorism and thus make a common cause with the US and the West. The US found in India an ally that was a fellow democracy and could help US achieve its global objectives in the Asia Pacific. India thus emerged as US's preferred partner to counter-balance the rising China. The US-India strategic partnership is a reality borne primarily out of the US-China competition.

In the past two decades, the US has invested heavily in empowering India militarily and technologically. A series of agreements have been signed between India and the US, which have bolstered the Indian military and technological capabilities. These agreements allow use of each other military logistics, enable compatibility of encrypted communication equipment, and sharing of geo-spatial intelligence. In January 2023, an Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) was inaugurated. During the recent state visit of Prime Minister Modi to the US on 20-24 June 2023, several new agreements were signed to facilitate greater technology sharing, co-development and co-production opportunities in industry, government and academic institutions, semiconductor supply chain and innovation partnership, cooperation between General Electric and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for manufacture of GE F-414 engines in India, and supply of armed drones to India.

Although traditionally India has imported arms from Russia, since 2012 there has been a sharp shift towards the US for military cooperation. India has also been constantly increasing its military spending. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India was the fifth largest military spender in the world in 2017, and after steady increase in the defense budgets in subsequent years, it was ranked third in 2021 after the US and China. In 2022, India was the fourth largest military spender, and its military spending was over US\$81.4 billion. India has also significantly increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

In the nuclear arena, Washington has been providing all-out support to India's nuclear program. The two countries signed Agreement 123 on civil nuclear cooperation in 2005. The US also facilitated India to obtain a waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2008 to allow nuclear commerce with India. The US has also been facilitating India's quest for membership of the NSG. Conversely, Washington has pressured Pakistan to accept limits on its nuclear weapons development program, while no such limits are placed on

India's nuclear program. Pakistan believes that this discriminatory behavior has undermined strategic stability in South Asia.

The US tilt towards India seems to have emboldened Indian leadership to pursue its ambitions, internal and external. Internally, the government of Prime Minister Modi is pursuing Hindutva driven policies to create a Hindu Rashtra (state) in India. This has caused considerable alarm amongst the minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. The US State Department's 2022 report on international religious freedom has documented India's violations of the human rights of minorities. Seventy US legislators wrote a letter to President Biden to draw the attention of Prime Minister Modi on human rights violations of minorities in India. Several analysts have expressed concern on the weakening of democratic values in India.

The Indian government has also assaulted the Kashmiri identity and unilaterally changed the status of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The state was annulled and Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh were made union territories in August 2019. A systematic demographic and electoral engineering has since been underway to change the Muslim majority status of Jammu and Kashmir and to disenfranchise the people of Kashmir. Pakistan has condemned these actions and made peace talks with India conditional on returning the situation in occupied Kashmir towards normalcy and return of statehood.

On its policies with neighbors, India has adopted a particularly hard attitude towards Pakistan. For over seven years since 2016, there has been limited contact between the two governments. India continues to accuse Pakistan of cross border terrorism despite the fact that Pakistan has fought against terrorism at an enormous human and financial cost, and has achieved results, especially by helping to eliminate AQ. Pakistan feels that it is a victim of terrorism, perpetrated by India, which sent a serving naval intelligence officer Kulbhashan Jadev to Balochistan to create instability there. Likewise, Pakistanis complain that India has used the soil of Afghanistan against Pakistan. Pakistan was, therefore, not comfortable with the US moves to involve India in Afghanistan. Pakistan was also upset that the US joined India in squeezing Pakistan through financial action task force (FATF).

India's hardline attitude against Pakistan was manifested most glaringly when India carried out a surgical strike against Pakistan in February 2019. The encounter that ensued in the air downed an Indian plane whose pilot was captured. Pakistan released the pilot as a goodwill gesture. Another aggressive act has been the landing in Pakistan of an Indian missile Brahmos in March 2022 under unexplained circumstances. On both occasions, Pakistan exercised restraint and therefore the tensions did not escalate. Pakistan was not pleased that the US did not pay much attention to these developments, particularly the surgical strike in February 2019, which represented a doctrinal shift in India towards preemptive actions, a high-risk strategy against its nuclear-armed neighbor.

India is also experiencing difficulties in its relations with other neighbors in South Asia. India had a confrontation with China in the Galwan Valley in May 2020. India also placed a punishing unofficial economic embargo against Nepal in 2015. Sri Lanka is also finding it difficult to strike a balance in its relations with India and with China. Even in Bangladesh, resentment seems to be growing against India's overwhelming influence. A Bangladeshi American scholar participating in the Bay of Bengal Conversations 2022 described the relationship as "too close for comfort" owing mainly to the tyranny of geography with India surrounding Bangladesh on three sides.

Interestingly, while the US is wooing India for strategic cooperation, India is seeking to exercise its "strategic autonomy". Despite its strategic partnership with the US, India has maintained economic and commercial ties with Russia as well as China. India's prominent journalist Barkha Dutt, writing for Washington Post, noted that in a multipolar world, India would be a pole, and not an ally of the US. India

chose not to condemn Russia for its aggression in Ukraine, and is buying Russia oil after Russia was forced to look East in view of West's sanctions against Russia.

In the wake of China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a question has arisen whether the US, being a friend of both India and Pakistan, can play a role to help resolve issues and bring peace in South Asia. If the past experience is any guide, even if the US was willing to do so, India has consistently resisted mediation by any third party. One clear signal came vide the joint statement issued after Prime Minister Modi's state visit to India. The joint statement did not mention Russia or China by name but singled out Pakistan for alleged cross border terrorism. Pakistan objected to this violation of a third country norm in bilateralism and recalled how Pakistan had fought to defeat terrorism. Pakistan was disappointed to see the US agree to the inclusion of such a negative reference about Pakistan in the joint statement.

### The Afghan lens

For over four decades, the US has viewed Pakistan mainly through the Afghan lens. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the US embarked upon a proxy war against the Soviets through Mujahideen and considerable help from Pakistan. The Soviets left Afghanistan in 1988. The US did not take long to disengage from the region. Worse, the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan for suspicion to produce atomic weapons. Pakistanis felt deeply disillusioned with the US.

A decade later, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought the US back to the region. The US invaded Afghanistan to punish and eliminate the AQ. The Taliban, the then rulers of Afghanistan, decided not to fight frontally but went under-ground. Thus started a protracted conflict in Afghanistan. The US first targeted AQ and managed to decimate it considerably with Pakistan's support, and then engaged in a war with the Taliban that became a frustrating experience for the US. The US would blame Pakistan for providing safe havens to the Taliban. Pakistanis made several attempts to explain to the US that the Taliban's fighting cadre was in Afghanistan and the US should work towards a political solution rather than a military victory.

The US finally came along and started negotiating with the Taliban culminating in the February 2020 agreement that paved the ground for the US to pull out its troops from Afghanistan. No sooner did the US pull its troops out of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani folded up, as did the Afghan National Army. The Taliban took over the country in just eleven days. The Taliban had to run the government with little financial resources and hardly any trained human resource. The humanitarian crisis deepened within weeks, and the country's economic situation grew from bad to worse. The continuation of international sanctions against the Taliban made it difficult for other governments to help, except for humanitarian assistance.

Pakistan took the position that the Biden administration should not abandon the people of Afghanistan and stay engaged. The underlying concern was that the economic coercion of the Taliban could lead Afghanistan back to anarchy, and provide safe havens for terrorist entities. This was a prospect with which neither the West nor the region could live with. Although the US has contributed to aid for Afghanistan through the United Nations, it instituted a freeze on nearly US\$7 billion worth of Afghan assets lying in New York on the ground that it was unclear who had the legal authority to access the account.

Meanwhile, the Taliban are facing an unwelcoming situation. No country in the world has formally recognized the Taliban government although many have maintained or opened embassies in Kabul. The Taliban also require technical and financial help from the international community to run the institutions of the state. Although the Taliban control the entire territory of Afghanistan, the security situation could come under stress from the resistance brewing in the fringes of the country. The bigger threat, however, is from

the so-called Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), which had attacked a hospital in Kabul in November 2021.

The international community expects the Taliban to pay attention to three critical areas of the Taliban rule. The first is an expectation that the Taliban would form an inclusive government. They have taken some steps but not enough. Some resistance movements are building up in Tajik and Uzbek areas. The second expectation is that the Taliban should respect the right of girls to get education. The third expectation is that the Taliban would not allow Afghan territory to be used for terrorism anywhere.

For the Taliban to get international acceptance, recognition, and legitimacy, they would need to honor these commitments. It needs to be understood that if peace does not return to Afghanistan, one likely scenario could be a civil war, which would be highly disastrous for the region. Of greater concern is the ISIS and AQ trying to come back to ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan. The Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is already carrying out attacks on the border and various areas of Pakistan. A fresh wave of refugees could flow towards Pakistan with its attendant consequences.

The regional countries are currently engaged with each other and with the Taliban to find a path towards peace and stability of Afghanistan. While the regional countries are doing what they must, the US and Europe should also play their part specially to ameliorate the humanitarian and economic crises. Pakistan and the US would need to cooperate, once again, in addressing the potential threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan but also in supporting the people of Afghanistan who have suffered war and conflict for so long.

### **Bilateral Relations:**

Bilateral conversations between Pakistan and the US cannot be separated from the prevailing geo-political environment being shaped by the US-China strategic competition. The US has its own perspective about the close cooperation that Pakistan enjoys with China. Although the US officials have often spoken about their concerns that Chinese debts are a trap for developing countries, the US has not taken any concrete step to create a wedge or misunderstanding between Pakistan and China. For its part, China has also been advising Pakistan to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with the United States. In that sense, Pakistan need not be overly concerned that it would require to choose whether to side with the US or with China. For Pakistan, a world divided into camps is highly undesirable. It is a matter of satisfaction that there are clear indications now both from the US and China that they would not heading towards any Cold War. The US is also not thinking of decoupling from China and is working only on de-risking its politico-economic strengths. In that scenario, Pakistan is now well placed to have solid and positive bilateral relations with both China and the US with focus on Pakistan's economic security.

Besides the US-China competition, the Afghanistan situation also affects Pakistan-US ties. Soon after the US withdrawal, the Biden administration tried to scapegoat Pakistan (Secretary Blinken's testimony before Congress in September 2021). However, later the US Generals acknowledged their own 'strategic failure' (Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testimony to US Congress). The rhetoric against Pakistan has since subsided. There is a better understanding in the US about the role that Pakistan had played in countering terrorism and working with the US to stabilize Afghanistan. Even as the Taliban government struggles to ensure that Afghan soil is not used for terrorism against any country, the US and Pakistan seem to be contemplating ways by which the two countries can collaborate to counter the threat of terrorist entities seeking to establish a foothold in Afghanistan.

In the regional context, the US has chosen India as its preferred partner in its Indo Pacific Strategy. Yet, India would like to maintain its autonomy to determine what kind of relations it wishes to have with Russia and China. The US, accordingly, is also keeping its options open and is seeking good ties with other countries in South Asia, including Pakistan.

The US embassy in Islamabad has become considerably active to improve relations. Pakistan's foreign minister has also undertaken a number of visits to the US. Under these circumstance, Pakistan's messaging to the US should be:

- that Pakistan does not see the two relationships (with China and the US) as a zero-sum game. That Pakistan could still be a bridge to China for the US;
- that corporate America be encouraged to avail of the economic opportunities that are becoming available in Pakistan. Alternatively, the US must not resent if vacuum is filled by China and other powers;
- that the US has a responsibility to contribute to bringing peace in Afghanistan, which must not be abandoned;
- that the militant groups had been reined in and Pakistan is well on its way to implementing its National Action Plan against terrorism and extremism. However, the threat of TTP is real and Pakistan is trying to deal with it; and
- that India must not be facilitated to act as a regional hegemon because if it does, the regional friends of the US would face difficult choices and peace and tranquility of the region could be affected.

Pakistan and the US should re-start the broad-based strategic dialogue that was happening under the Obama administration with its six sectoral working groups. All issues and concerns mentioned above can be discussed through this structured dialogue.

Pakistan expects the US to respect its sovereignty to take economic decisions, including on CPEC. Pakistan would be better placed if corporate America also invests in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion:**

The early years of Pakistan laid a solid foundation for developing a positive relationship with the US. However, the ever-changing geopolitics created a roller coaster kind of relations between the two countries. The US tends to view its relations with Pakistan through narrow specific lenses of its interests viz China, India, Afghanistan, counter terrorism and nuclear security. Pakistan does not prefer this kind of transactional relationship and prefers a broad-based bilateral relationship independent of any other relationship that the US has.

Another important feature is that while government to government contacts have oscillated, the people-to-people contacts have remained strong in multiple domains, including trade, investment, agriculture, education, and IT. The Pakistani American community, too, has served to bring the two countries closer. For all these reasons, there would always be mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries despite the mistrust that has often affected the governments of both countries.

-----