

US-Pakistan Relations in Retrospect: The Changing Geopolitical Landscape of South Asia

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Abstract

A study of the 70 years of strategic relations between the US and Pakistan reveals that the main consideration in the partnership has always been security. Considering the changes in international politics that have a particular impact in the region – like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the growing support for multilateralism – it is high time the two review this relationship and look beyond the security lens. Pakistan, population wise the sixth largest country, sits at the crossroads of major powers' interest due to its pivotal geographic location and natural resources. This study analyses various phases of the US-Pakistan relations in the region. The discussion finds Pakistan is a lynchpin for Central, South and West Asia connecting the East and West. Avoiding Pakistan shall be a gross diplomatic mistake by the US, rather a renewed partnership that thinks beyond the security of this region is required. The focus should on development, social, economic, and environmental challenges to explore opportunities for partnership between the US and Pakistan.

Key Words:

US-Pakistan,
Strategic
Partnership,
Power,
Security,
Geopolitics,
Geo-Strategy

Introduction

The main development of the twentieth century that had far reaching implications for global politics was the ascent of the United States (US) and the concurrent descent of the other traditional great powers. The advent of the present century, however, has witnessed changes that may have profound consequences for global politics for some time to come. The rise of China and the growing trend towards multilateralism has generated debates that questions the continuing status of the hegemony of the US in a complex interdependent world. The decline of the US hegemony would have consequences for its relations with countries around the

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world. It would mean the US would be reprioritizing its interests and consequently its relationships with old partners. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project under the BRI, has put Pakistan at the crossroads of major powers' interest due to its pivotal geographic location and natural resources. The US to counter China has been paying more attention to India while increasingly criticizing Pakistan for not cooperating in its war against terrorism. Despite having a partnership spanning over seventy years, the US-Pakistan nexus stills suffers from a major trust deficit. This study examines this conundrum by analyzing the various phases of the US-Pakistan relations.

The historic events of twentieth century, particularly the victory of allied forces in the Second World War (1939-1945) drew some new geo-political changes in international politics. The nature of world politics was shaped by a bipolar world (an ideological struggle between US & the former USSR). These political developments fostered the birth of new nation-states mostly in third world countries particularly in Asia and Africa. This was mainly the result of decolonization as the major powers were in gradual decline and failed to retain control over their respective colonies. These newly born states started to join either of the two blocs of the bipolar world to safe guard their interest and ensure survival. One such newly liberated nation was Pakistan that decided since nearly its inception decided to join the ideological bloc led by the US.

The genesis of Pakistan witnessed a Muslim mass mobilization and one of largest exodus of people in human history (Singh, 2016), resulting in decolonization through an independence movement against British rule in the sub-continent (Lieven, 2012; Marker, 2016). Pakistan, which was created in 1947 on the basis of Islamic ideology, considered Pakistan as 'Islam ka qila hei' or the fortress of Islam (Ahmed, 2013, p.2). Despite, religious nationalism being a centripetal force to create the nation-state, Pakistan continued to face challenges from various ethnic groups. In the early years of independence the Pakistani leadership engaged at two fronts, at domestic landscape the national leadership had to deal with issues of state building and nation building especially how to resolve the emerging challenges from ethnic divides (Hashmi, 2017; Jaffrelot, 2015; Shaikh, 2009); while, at the external front, the rivalry with India over unresolved political disputes like Kashmir emerged as fundamental challenges for the new nation to deal with (Schofield, 2000). Pakistan, a newly born state, had to reconstruct and frame its political and ideological notions of national identities over the territorial states legitimized (Harshe, 2005).

Like other regions of the world, soon Pakistan also became not only active participant of Cold war politics dominated under bipolarity, but the geostrategic location also benefited Pakistan to modernize its military hardware (Ahmed, 2013). Therefore, in the South Asian context the India-Pakistan rivalry prompted US and the Soviet Union as global powers and China as a regional power to intervene many times. In retrospect, we can see a number of conflicts directly or

indirectly forced the involvement of superpowers in the region, i.e. major wars of 1962 between India and China, the 1965 and 1971 wars between India and Pakistan, Soviet invasion to Afghanistan in 1979, the nuclear tests in 1998, the battle of Kargil between India and Pakistan in 1999, followed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, where the Al Qaeda terrorists carried out attacks on the direction of their leaders residing in Afghanistan, on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon outside of the Washington, D.C. (Brzezinski, 2012; Hagerty, 2005).

This paper analyzes the nature of US-Pakistan relationship during the different historical phases since the independence of Pakistan and its impact on the post-9/11 agenda. The post-9/11 policies are primarily based on the global war against terrorism, one of the longest war in the history of United States that has yet to be concluded. Whereas the strong US-Pakistan partnership and mutual trust is considered pivotal to win this war against terrorism, otherwise recent frustrations at both ends seek to find scapegoats to blame for not achieving the set targets.

In order to analyze the future relationship between these two strategic partners, it will be more helpful to seek the historical perspective. The historical assessment shows that a perception telling the foundations of relationship *begins and ends with security*. And for the very reason, Pakistan anticipated US support in strategic grounds, especially balancing the India in the region. During the years of US-Pakistan relations, Pakistan had three wars and many minor military clashes with India, four military coups, on many occasions the economy reached to near collapse, and reverted back from the grave with a weak economy (Cohen, 2004, p.267).

US-Pakistan Relations in Retrospect

The US-Pakistan relations have remained on a rollercoaster ride, experiencing heights of best friendly ties, when Pakistan helped bring the US closer to China during the Nixon era to becoming a frontline state in containing the Soviets during the Cold war to the lowest ebbs in its relations during the Obama regime and continued during the Trump regime for growing frustrations over the US led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. The continuation of the very nature of future alliance between both countries also depends on new global re-alignments between different regional and global players. And the role of leadership and unfolding series of geostrategic events in Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia is crucial in designing these future relations.

After all, it is important to learn from history that geopolitical events and alliances of first quarter of every century have set the agenda for rest of the century. Some of the most significant events at the beginning of this century setting a new global political script include the changing geopolitical landscape of South Asia with Russia reasserting itself in the region, the rising Chinese economic

powerhouse, and US inclination towards India as a substitute to Pakistan for off-shoring balancing against China. The actors of this script have to perform their due role, and this may begin an episode of ‘new great game’ of the ‘twenty first century. Earlier, in the same geographical settings of South and Central Asia, a great game rivalry between Russia and Britain had been played on the “chessboard of Imperial diplomacy” (Curzon, 1889, p.326).

Cold War: Honey Moon Years of US-Pakistan Affinity

The US-Pakistan relationship is a longstanding historic relation that forged from the outset as a pivotal ally of US aligned with US Cold war containment strategy. Pakistan remained one of top US foreign policy agenda in South Asian region. This partnership can be categorized into three important phases: i) The Cold War period of Honeymoon -1947 to 1989; ii) The years of crisis in the relationship - 1990 to 1993; iii) The Years of Rapprochement and Fragile relationship -Post-9/11 era (Kux, 2001).

The post-war years of bipolarity kept both India and Pakistan in a dilemma of aligning either with the liberal-capitalist camp under the leadership of the USA or the communist camp led by the USSR. India promptly showed its inclination towards USSR, while Pakistani leaders who were educated or received professional trainings in the Western institutions felt comfortable with joining the US as the patron in the region. Interestingly, in 1948 after recognizing Pakistan’s creation the Soviet leadership took the lead in officially inviting the Pakistani leadership to visit Moscow. As highlighted earlier, by and large, the Pakistani political and civil-military leadership including the Founding fathers M.A. Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan were also Western trained. This made them more inclined towards joining the West instead of the Soviet bloc which resulted from the outset in framing pro-Western policies (Hilali, 2005; Wolpert, 1999, Marker, 2016). Therefore, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan avoided Stalin’s invitation to visit Moscow; rather in 1950 he decided to visit Washington instead. During 1947-1952, President Harry S. Truman remained indifferent towards Pakistan, however, in 1953 President Eisenhower’s administration became uneasy about the spread of Communism in Asian countries. United States fearing the domino effect gave Pakistan the chance to become closer to Washington. The growing relationship helped Pakistan sign a Mutual Defense Agreement in 1954 (Gilani, 2006).

The mutual interest of both countries and the geostrategic conditions finally led Pakistan to join the Western Defence Alliance Systems i.e. SEATO and CENTO (Baghdad Pact). Joining these alliance systems promoted Pakistan with a distinct status termed as America’s most allied ally in Asia (Kissinger, 1994). Pakistan received substantial economic aid and military assistance to build its economic institutions and strengthen its military capabilities, which was

wholeheartedly welcomed due to the threat perception from the eastern borders - (Indi). During the Cold war period, the US also supported Pakistan's stance over the Kashmir issue. This issue has already caused three wars between India and Pakistan and the last one in 1999 brought both the nuclear powers to the brink of nuclear conflict (Hilali, 2005). The US foreign policy to curtail the spread of Communism encouraged Pakistan to get the leverage to avail military support, in addition hundreds of Pakistani military officers attended US military schools during 1955 to 1958, and continued the exchange training opportunities in later years as well.

India, considered as an archrival to Pakistan embarked aggressively on the nuclearization of its defense arsenals, which created a fear and concern among Pakistani statecraft. Benefiting from the special relationship with the US, Pakistan managed to pursue its desire to access nuclear technology. The nuclear program started as an energy program under the US *Atoms for Peace* program initiated by Eisenhower in the 1950s. Pakistan received its first reactor from the US in 1962 ("Pakistani Nuclear Program", 2018). In this regard, another significant American contribution were the periodic visits of American nuclear experts to Pakistan's military staff college in Quetta. As Stephen Cohen remarks, in 1957 a US nuclear-warfare team made modifications to and revised the old syllabus of the military college and updated it with fresh data (Hoodbhoy, 2004). These cordial developments encouraged Pakistan to build its nuclear bomb in a few decades. Pakistan also continued to guarantee the safe guard of US interest in the region, including permission was granted for the use of Pakistani air base - Badaber Air Force Base - near the Afghan border for U-2 reconnaissance flight over the USSR. Similarly, in the post 9/11 period, Pakistan allowed the US to use its Shamsi and Jaccobabad airbases to launch the controversial drone flights and airstrikes against Alqaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan and the Pakistani border region with Afghanistan.

After the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971, the US-Pakistan relations started feeling hiccups. During his tenure, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto showed a substantial inclination towards the USSR and tried to bring the Arab nationalists together to create a Muslim bloc. These moves implicitly challenged the regional status quo for the US both in South Asia and the Middle East. Interestingly, despite the US-Pakistan estrangement years of 1970s Pakistan helped engineer the broach in the US-China diplomatic relations. Pakistan facilitated the secret trip of Henry Kissinger, the then US secretary of state in July 1971, followed by President Richard Nixon's visit which changed the entire dynamics of Cold War politics (Macmillan, 2007; Aijazuddin, 2000; Kissinger, 1994). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, required Pakistan to become the frontline state for the US to lead a global jihad against communism in Afghanistan. Pakistan received a huge aid worth US \$3.5 billion including some 30 F-16s fighter planes. Pakistan became the fore front state to meet the targets of US foreign policy, including the

establishment of a number of madaras to train and prepare jihadis for the anti-Soviet war. These breeding units later on became the basis of present day terrorism.

Post-Cold War: Beginning of Fragile Relations and Seek Rapprochement

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 became one of the main causes of Soviet disintegration. The end of the Cold War and search for a new enemy or potential challenger to US as a sole power suddenly engaged United States with an unanticipated 'hot war in the Persian Gulf, and political challenges in the Middle East (Gaddis, 1992-93). With the departure of the Soviets, US interest in South Asia whittled down, which disturbed many of policy makers in Pakistan. The unfinished Afghan war, issues of hundreds of thousands of refugees, economic perils, tribal conflicts, a heavily weaponized Afghan society, and drug issues were left to the Pakistani society without seeking any viable solution.

The US lawmakers become stringent on Pakistan, a country that happened to be one of the closest US ally. US lawmakers demanded that Pakistan stop its nuclear and missile program, while arms sale to Pakistan was also suspended under the Pressler Amendment. The unipolar moments of post-Cold War period left US as the sole superpower with a new world order that underestimated the growing multilateralism a potential challenge for an indispensable super power. As a result, US realized that it had missed numerous geopolitical opportunities that may have benefited the US interests in the longer run. For instance, a chance of rapprochement with Iran, and Iran's pledge to roll back its nuclear program if the US had assured the security and regional Iranian interest. But, on the contrary US lawmakers missed the opportunity and leadership miscalculated its capabilities and the issue of infungibility caused a setback to the US in years to come (Hagerty, 2005).

The end of the Cold war witnessed the demise of the Soviet Union, but at the same time the rise of transnational security threats altered traditional security dynamics. The traumatic events of 9/11 not only shocked the global community, but demanded multinational coordinated effort to tackle the transnational security challenges. Afghanistan, once again become the focus of attention to eradicate the menace of terrorism - the same actors who had once assisted the US in defeating the Soviets. As a result of the 9/11 attacks on US, Pakistan once again became the most important strategic ally for US and NATO forces in the region.

US-Pakistan renewed their strategic relationship with the post 9/11 episode, and in these years since 2001 both sides engaged in a process of repairing, rebuilding and redefining the nature of their relations in the post-Cold War period. US waived off all sanctions imposed on Pakistan, after Pakistan's nuclear tests of 1998. But at the same, US lawmakers observing the rise of China and its growing influence in the Pacific were prompted to design a two-pronged foreign policy in

South Asia. It continued to depend on Pakistan to address the issues of terrorism in Afghanistan, and simultaneously, gradually opened up diplomatic relations with India to counter China's regional influence (Qazi, 2012). Predicting a similar scenario, in the 1970s the former Pakistani Premier Z. A. Bhutto, who spouted the slogan of Islamic socialism and desired to join the Soviet camp, had previously emphasized that the US intended to aid India and ignore Pakistan, so that the rise of India in the region may counter China and influence Pakistan under Indian hegemony through a policy of 'unite and rule' (Bhutto, 1967).

The idea of the US establishing warm relations with India had already started to develop especially during the Clinton period, and US supported India as a growing regional economic and military power. However, the attacks of September 11, 2001 deferred, but did not deflect, the implementation of the US vision designed for India. Pakistan, received some strategic relaxations as a frontline state in the war on terror; while Bush, through his ambassador Robert Blackwill, made it clear that he envisioned a long-term relationship with New Delhi (Cohen, 2006). The political events linked with post 9/11 period benefitted India more than Pakistan, primarily India enjoyed the removal of economic sanctions; secondly, India successfully showcased itself as a victim of terrorism, and started to suppress indigenous movements in India; thirdly, it got closer to the US and was allowed to purchase the Israeli PHALCON aerial warnings and control aircraft that substantially added to India's airpower (Hagerty, 2005); and fourthly, above all a US company agreed to manufacture F-16 fighter planes in India.

There was a major visible shift in US foreign policy towards South Asia whereby India gathered much attention. For instance, on July 18, 2005 when President George W. Bush visited India, he consented to provide support for India's civil nuclear for peaceful purposes. The Obama administration and the current Trump administration re-affirmed the civil nuclear deal, and US lobbied in favour of India to join the nuclear suppliers group (NSG) (Hyder, 2013). Even though, India is not a signatory of NPT, which violates the basic requirement for the supplier group. Resultantly, Pakistan objected this one sided offer to India, which eventually shifted the balance of power in the region. Pakistan's voice went unheeded, which forced Pakistani lawmakers to go closer to China and develop military and strategic ties with Russia. In addition, Pakistan realized that the US interest in South Asia has leaned towards India, as seen in the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan crisis that almost came to the brink of war, the US decided to carry out joint military exercise with India.

The White House perspective is that Pakistan has been dual in its policies on one hand it is trying to curb terrorism while at same time it is providing sanctuaries to the militants. Pakistan denies such allegations and demands that the US respect Pakistan's role in the global war on terror, in which thousands of Pakistani civilian and security personnel lost their lives, and which have cost \$billions of dollar in

terms of economic loss to the country. The leadership in the US refers to India as more of an opportunity than a problem, and they have set a comprehensive economic, political and even military-strategic relationship with New Delhi (Council on Foreign Relations, 2003). However, ignoring Pakistan means undermining the geostrategic and geopolitical significance of Pakistan, that makes it a pivot state in the region.

Despite, the US renewing strategic relations with Pakistan in the wake of 9/11 events, the foreign policy objectives have remained bewildering. Pakistan objected to Obama's US strategy toward Pakistan which was linked with Afghanistan under the 'AfPak' region or policy (Butool, 2013; Fleck and Kilby, 2010). On the other hand, Pakistan is situated at the crossroads with a number of US foreign policy concerns. These are terrorism, nuclear proliferation, democratization, and other socio-economic matters. To address these concerns, the US re-affirmed that Pakistan is a vital strategic partner and US desires to invest in non-security areas of development. Because, US lawmakers wanted to change the perception that US-Pakistan relations are only based on security needs. Despite the claims, 9/11 strikes led to a third US-Pakistan alliance which is mainly security dominated as the Bush administration replayed Jimmy Carter's policy of lifting sanctions and providing aid to Pakistan (Cohen, 2004).

Pakistan got substantial US concessions in both the economic and military aspects. The White House announced a five-year, \$3 billion aid package for Pakistan. The transfers of F-16 fighter aircraft and import of Pakistani goods to Western markets (Hoyt, 2005). However, the transfer of Aircrafts did not materialize leaving behind a trust deficit between well-decorated ally tags. Overall, the post 9/11 relations helped Pakistan to gain financial benefit vis-à-vis strong military support. India did protest, because it believed this would benefit Pakistan to dominate the power structure in the region. Pakistan's economy boosted to 8.4 percent GDP in 2005, the per capita income raised from \$460 to \$800. Foreign debt was reduced from \$39 billion to \$36 billion. In addition, new US-Pakistan strategic alliance helped Pakistan to create a better image at the international level (Musharraf, 2006).

The global financial crisis of 2008 and Gen. Musharraf's departure from Pakistani politics provided the democratically elected government of Pakistan's People Party (PPP) to renegotiate many strategic policies with the US. The US lawmakers approved a non-security bill called Kerry-Lugar Bill in 2010 with a provision to release \$1.5 billion per year to Pakistan for five years as an acknowledgement of Pakistan's services and sacrifices during the war on terror (Ali, 2009). This was a non-security bill planned to be spent on the social sector including on education, health and training exchange programs. President Zardari's government in Pakistan endorsed the bill, but faced a domestic challenge especially from the defense officials believing that the bill was designed to

undermine Pakistan's sovereignty and threaten its nuclear program.

The current Trump administration has withdrawn most of the aid programs and has also slashed economic and military aid to Pakistan. The US leadership is concerned about an alleged dubious role of Pakistan when it comes to dealing with extremism or the governments ability to tackle domestic issues that have a significant impact on the country's foreign policy. Pakistan has categorically denied such allegations and successfully carried out a series of military operations in the previously Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan (Butool, 2013). Once, these tribal regions were called 'ungoverned spaces' and dens of terror, but after the military operation much of peace is restored and normalcy of life is witnessed.

Conclusion

It can be observed that during the last few decades, US foreign policy has been shaped by two events: a) the end of the Cold War; and b) the War on Terror. Short term foreign policy decisions driven by the State Department strongly influenced the U.S. aid programs. Many analysts anticipated that the post-Cold War era would bring a long run peace through a reallocation of U.S. bilateral assistance and particularly focusing on developmental or humanitarian objectives instead of designing foreign policy through the security lens. The political dynamics are changing and brings in a growing political awareness that new "soft forms of power are emerging, especially in the form of culture, education, and mass communications, the nature of which cannot be calculated according to traditional geopolitical equations" (Gaddis, 1992-93, p.52). However, the US and bilateral initiatives for longer peace is shaken due to a vacuum of dynamism in political leadership, lack of persistence to follow a policy as rise of other powers distract the situation on ground. It is noted that throughout all regimes from President Bush to President Trump a policy of deterrence dominated, with a hazy aid policy and absence of a policy of inclusiveness to engage all stakeholders for a viable peace.

Afghanistan campaign has been the longest US engagement in its history. At times when the US was thinking of an exit strategy from Afghanistan it wanted to put the blame on someone for its failure to achieve its core objectives. After decades of war against extremists, the US agreed to negotiate with extremist groups like Taliban, and maintained a differentiation that those who come forward for talks and are willing to surrender weapons are good Taliban while the others are bad Taliban.

Both US and Pakistan need to develop a new mechanism to cooperate and address domestic challenges i.e. issues of governance, transparency, free judiciary, corruption free system, education and health provision, so ordinary people will be the beneficiary. And at the same time, the US needs to assure Pakistan of its services as mediator between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir dispute, and

satisfy Pakistan's concern over India's growing military prowess and civil nuclear deal with the US. The solution to these challenges requires political will and flexibility on both sides; otherwise re-alignment and political transitions in South and Central Asia shall have an indelible impact on global politics.

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