

## STRATEGIC DIVERGENCE IN THE US-PAKISTAN RELATIONSHIP UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Yasir Malik\* & Saira Aquil\*\*

### Abstract

*This study analyses the US-Pakistan relationship during the Trump administration from a neo-classical realist lens. Along with systemic influences, the analysis framework also includes the role of domestic and cognitive factors in understanding both sides' perceptions, behaviors, and preferences toward each other. During Trump's presidential term, both sides could not fritter away the mistrust and move beyond the traditional course of engagement characterized by tactical convergence based on the rewards for service rendered by Pakistan. Pakistan was not a strategic choice for Washington since the two countries had contrasting expectations on evolving global developments, emerging regional geo-political and domestic reconfigurations. Parallel to this, Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities were exploited by the Republicans to reassert their leverage in bargaining. This grey area helped the White House allure Pakistan with its carrot-and-stick approach and compelled policy planners in Islamabad to think that a strong foreign policy always rests on a strong domestic base.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic Divergence, Modus Operandi, Economic Landscape, Tactical Convergence*

### Introduction

For the last two decades, the US has viewed its relationship with Pakistan with Afghanistan. During the war on terror, Pakistan assumed the role of a major non-NATO ally for advancing the US security interests in Afghanistan. Given the gradually changing security landscape in Afghanistan with the Taliban's ascendance in power and NATO's failing military mission, the US was compelled to rethink its Afghan strategy. The changing approach in Afghanistan was likely meant to be a

---

\* Former Research Fellow at South Asian Strategic Stability Institute, Islamabad. Email: Yasirturk800@gmail.com

\*\* Assistant Professor at the Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Email: saquil@qau.edu.pk.

change in the US policy toward Pakistan. Naïve to the nuances of international politics, President Trump's initial years in the White House were more of the same with regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, as he took a much-needed shift in his Afghanistan policy and opted for a political dialogue with the Taliban, policy planners in Pakistan were also anticipating a rephrase in the contours of the US-Pakistan relationship. This was largely because both sides were not contented but needed each other in many ways. Islamabad conceived that the non-NATO partner security role caused Pakistan more damage than it gained. At the same time, the successive US administrations had apprehensions about Pakistan's alleged connections with the Afghan Taliban. The contrasting perspectives fractured the relationship. Despite these divergent positions, the Trump era was the most important phase in which the war in Afghanistan was likely to end, and the US-Pakistan relationship was to take a new start. This phase was an inflection point where the contours of this relationship had to be reinvented. However, during the Trump years, the relationship remained wigwagged from retrogression to a very low progression.

Why was this relationship fraught with myriad challenges, and unable to take a new flight? The reasons lay in systemic, domestic, and cognitive contexts. The systemic influences, including the US pronounced strategic competition with China, Indo-US growing strategic defense cooperation, and the contrasting US-Pakistan regional strategic interests, had bearings on this relationship. For Islamabad, the US objective of strategic containment of China with the help of India was bound to cut both ways for Pakistan. First, it carried implications for the Sino-Pakistan shared economic interests. Secondly, India's access to advanced and sophisticated US military technologies could disturb the regional balance of power and undermine the dynamics of strategic stability in the region. Both sides also had different expectations based on their strategic necessities, regional interests, and threat perceptions. Parallel to this, Trump and Biden needed more enthusiasm to pursue any overwhelming economic association between the two countries. To this end, Pakistan's turbulent economic and political situation did not appeal to Washington and its geo-economic motivations. The US reticence can be gauged from the fact that despite three premier-level interactions only in 2019, there was no exchange of notes beyond Afghanistan. Pakistan's unpropitious business and investment climate also deserve its share of the blame for keeping the economic relations impoverished. The US, under its new Indo-Pacific framework, wanted to rejuvenate its geo-economic engagements with countries inclining toward China, but Pakistan's much-resonated geo-economic rhetoric had little substance to offer in tangible terms. Pakistan was rebalancing its trading requirements with China to some extent as there was a geographic proximity advantage. However, there was much to gain and offer to the US, had intentions coalesced with opportunities. Economic affairs have been given no immediate priority.

The US presumed that Pakistan's dependence on the US for its security imperatives or economic development could not be ruled out. Parallel to this, Washington could use its influence on international political and financial institutions to coerce Pakistan into its geopolitical interests. This paradox of exercising leverage and overestimating its power in Washington derailed the possibility of transforming the bilateral relationship.<sup>1</sup> Rather than finding a middle ground, both sides opposed each other to a greater extent, where reversing things was never easy.

As for the recent trajectory of the US-Pakistan relationship, President Biden is largely following the course that Trump, his predecessor, drew for Pakistan. That is Trump Lite. It is evident from Biden's comments that Pakistan is one of the world's most dangerous nations because it possesses nuclear weapons and lacks political cohesiveness. The relationship between Washington and Islamabad is shown to be fragile and low on trust. The Biden administration sought Pakistan's help in fighting terrorism and collaboration on non-traditional security challenges. Islamabad gave back by allowing the US to use its airspace to kill Al Qaeda commander Ayman al Zawahiri in a targeted drone attack in Kabul. Helping Pakistan rehabilitate flood refugees and working together to combat international terrorism are important aspects of Pakistan-US relations. But Washington's current policies reflect Trump's policies and practices toward Islamabad. A reflection of the past is deciding the current course of the relationship. If Pakistan offers something more than words, i.e., real economic incentives, then that could make way for policymakers to look beyond the strategic aspect of the relationship. Therefore, it is pivotal to understand the domestic context and the systemic influences in Pakistan-US relations in the Trump era to redefine a clear roadmap for the future.

### **Conceptualizing US-Pakistan Relations in The Framework of Neo-Classical Realism**

This study explains the complex relationship between the two countries in a neo-classical realist context that is a reformation of the earliest versions in a methodological sense. In the 1940s, when classical realism came into vogue, this theoretical tradition emphasized the domestic calibrations to survive in an anarchic architecture of the international system, i.e., the principle of self-help. When Kenneth Waltz published his book, *Theory of International Politics*, in 1979,<sup>2</sup> he had put forward the idea of structural realism, an extension of realist thought that focuses more on the international architecture or systemic factors in determining the

---

<sup>1</sup> Leverage is a multi-directional process, and not simply the prerogative of the strong. Robert M. Hathaway, "The Leverage Paradox: Pakistan and the United States", (Washington D.C., *Wilson Center*, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Illinois, *Waveland Press*: 2010)

dynamics of inter-state. These two variants of realism were methodically contradictory in terms of what determines a state's behavior in the international system. To explain a relationship or determine what causes the two states to diverge strategically, individual, internal, and external factors should be used for the analysis process. That is what neo-classical realism proposes. In October 1998, Gideon Rose, in his review article in *World Politics*, presented a new vision for a realist understanding of the world.<sup>3</sup> This updated and revised version of realist tradition which Gideon Rose coined in his review article, Neo-classical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy, as "neo-classical realism" combines structural analysis with actor-level analysis to predict a state's behavior. Rose claimed that the actions of a state in the international system can be explained by systemic variables (distribution of power capabilities); cognitive variables (perception and misperception of systemic pressures as well as other states' intentions and threats; and domestic variables, including state institutions, decision-making processes, elites, societal actors, values, culture, and narratives.<sup>4</sup> It explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought.<sup>5</sup> In the classical and neo-realist traditions, the domestic element was absent for predicting and explaining a state's behavior.

On the other hand, domestic politics is a key point in neo-classical realism. Although national power and the state's position in the international structure are decisive factors in a state's foreign policy choices, domestic variables can also shape a state's foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, neo-classical realists argue that domestic politics and conditions of states must be considered while analyzing drivers of their behavior and not just national interests and systemic factors. Fareed Zakaria, the co-founder of neo-classical realism in his book, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (1998)<sup>7</sup> combines classical realism and neo-realism. He does not simply put all his weight behind systemic variables and goes on to explain that the perception of one's place in the international system is also an important variable in determining a state's foreign policy decisions toward others. With the idea of perception, there comes a constructivist element within the neo-classical realist explanation what is believed to reduce the analytical purity of realism in explaining and predicting a state's behavior.

---

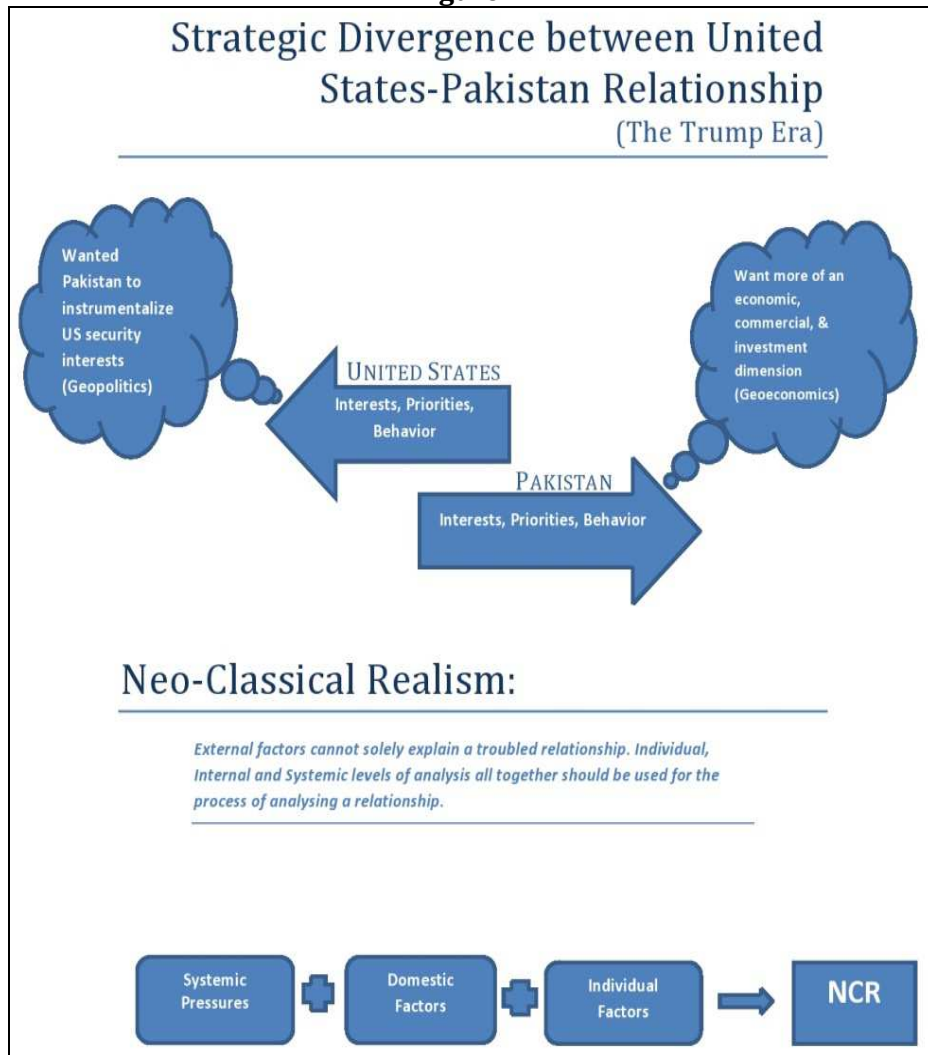
<sup>3</sup> Gideon Rose, Review of Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy, by Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, Randall L. Schweller, William Curti Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria, *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–172.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

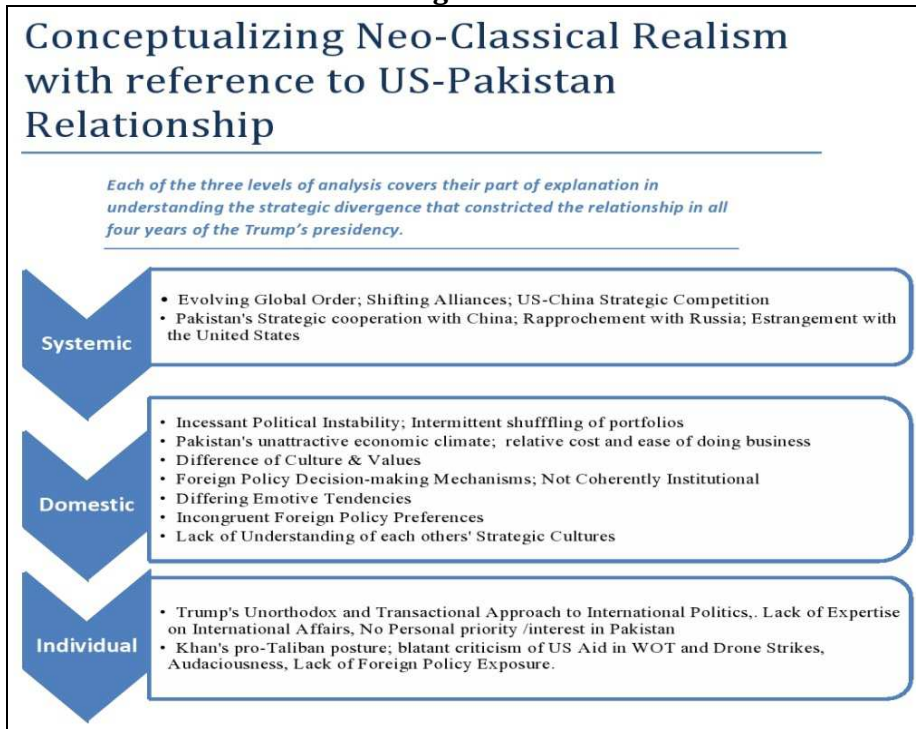
<sup>5</sup> Gideon Rose, Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Abdi Omar, "Is There Anything 'New' in Neoclassical Realism," *E-International Relations*, February 13, 2013, <https://www.e-ir.info/>

<sup>7</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *From wealth to power*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

**Figure 1:**

Source: Compiled by the Author.

**Figure 2:**

Source: Compiled by the Author

In the context of the US-Pakistan relationship, neo-classical realism provides an encompassing understanding of strategic divergences between the two. First, it was an asymmetric relationship as Pakistan was a relatively weaker state and depended on the US in many ways. Despite China's economic rise, the US holds an unparalleled military, political, and economic clout worldwide. Pakistan, a dependent state, has always had to look to the US to define this relationship. Because the strong player defines its interest toward the weaker one, it leverages its influence, and the weaker one adjusts and accommodates. Thus, the dynamics of this relationship depended mainly on US preferences. The bilateral relations during the Trump era were lurching between deep estrangement and tactical engagement, not only because of transformed regional and global dynamics but also due to the varying role of domestic factors. At the systemic level, the global environment was in flux. Power balance had been changing fundamentally, and realignment had occurred at both global and regional levels. The predominant trend among major powers was competition and confrontation rather than cooperation, destabilizing global impact and fuelling unpredictability. During Trump's years in the White House, the overarching and defining global reality was the standoff between US and

China.<sup>8</sup> Trump's America embarked on a strategy of containing China and mobilizing countries to counter Beijing's rising global power. The US-China tensions had a direct bearing on Pakistan. Though Pakistan had tried to avoid getting into the crosshairs of this confrontation, it could not dissociate itself from intensifying competition.

The Trump administration designated China as its strategic rival in its National Security Strategy.<sup>9</sup> It stated, "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests and attempt to erode the American security and prosperity."<sup>10</sup> While the US was pursuing its larger ambition of containing China's expanding geo-economic prowess in different regions of Asia and preventing its allies in the Indo-Pacific region from embracing China, Pakistan's relevance in the new Indo-Pacific vision of Washington had not been of primary concern. The underlying rationale was that Pakistan had a historically consequential relationship with China, and this relationship assumed enhanced strategic importance after both countries signed a multi-billion mega initiative, CPEC, in 2015. Washington was cognizant that CPEC provided a lifeline for Pakistan's ailing economy and Chinese investment in different sectors of Pakistan's economy, particularly energy, at that time was needed more than ever. At that time, Pakistan's economy necessitated a major stimulus China provided in those troubling moments. This further pushed Pakistan under the patronization of Beijing.

China stood by Pakistan in those difficult times when Pakistan, especially its economy, needed a rescue, and the two countries also shared an understanding of evolving geopolitical realities. They were deeply involved in actualizing the vision of connectivity to translate a win-win reality for both. Therefore, it took much work for the US to delineate Pakistan from China. If the US resolved to counter China in the region, India was the strategic choice. This growing relationship did not concern Pakistan as much as the augmentation of India's defense and strategic capabilities did. And when the US did not consider Pakistan's apprehensions, Pakistan resolved to face the onslaught of US opposition rather than succumbing to unconditional demands.

The Trump administration did not have an exclusive and articulated Pakistan policy. Republicans did have an Afghanistan policy, but they did not have a Pakistan policy. Instead, they dealt with Pakistan based on temporal considerations and tactical geopolitical convergences. In this

---

<sup>8</sup> Fumiaki Kubo, "Reading the Trump Administration's China Policy," *Asia-Pacific Review* (2019), V. 26, no. 1, 58-76.

<sup>9</sup> Bartosz Kowalski, The Elements of the China Challenge: Reading the Trump Administration's China Policy Testament, *Politeja-Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* 18, no. 73 (2021): 247-258.

<sup>10</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017.

context, three factors were important. First, the US had viewed Pakistan through the spectacle of Afghanistan since 2001. The Trump administration was no exception to this. Their entire approach toward Pakistan was restricted to the triangular dynamics of Pakistan-US-Afghanistan. Republicans believed Islamabad's support for the Taliban contributed to the US debacle there. This was not explicitly stated, but this was an overall perspective in the US policy circles. Second, India was an important factor in injecting the mistrust. India's procurement of military hardware under the pretext of an offshore balancing program of the US against encountering China beefed up Pakistan's threat assessments. Had the US-Pakistan found a middle ground while the US was reinforcing India without considering the security implications for Pakistan, a different situation could have emerged. Third, the US intentionally muted its response to India's unilateral actions in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>11</sup> Despite being an influential player in the international order, Washington showed a lack of interest in considering India's sheer disregard of the UN resolutions on the issue. The Kashmir issue was very much alive in President Trump's last two years, given India's colossal human rights violations in the valley, demographic engineering, and de-internationalization of a globally recognized dispute.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the stands taken by the US impacted its relationship with Pakistan.

At the domestic level of analysis, the US knew that Pakistan relies mainly on China's financial investment and assistance. Islamabad lacked the capacity to rebound itself domestically from the slumping economic trajectory. Pakistan's sagging economy was showing no immediate signs of a rebound unless an external stimulus made any difference. Islamabad's overwhelming reliance on China's economic investment in the country made Republicans in Washington decouple the US economic and security relationship with the former.

With the evolving geopolitical developments, US economic assistance, as a matter of undeclared policy, has had to be followed by security assistance from Pakistan.<sup>13</sup> This overconfidence of Washington made the ties limited and prone to greater risks than opportunities. The US assumed that Pakistan could only govern itself effectively and empower itself with US support. Its falling reserves, ballooning current account deficit, business development, and management practices, and investment

---

<sup>11</sup> Article 370 revoked: US says it's India's 'internal matter' in a blow to Pakistan, *Business Today*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/article-370-revoked-us-india-internal-matter-blow-pakistan/story/370888.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Julian Borger, Rex Tillerson, 'America First' means Divorcing Our Policy from Our Values, *The Guardian*, May 7, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Musavir Hameed, Saeeda Batool, Muhammad Ibrar Aslam, and Zain Ali, "Pak-US Relations under Trump Administration," *Asia Journal of International Peace & Security (AJIPS)* 5, no. 2 (2021): 300-309.



imperatives required the US economic interventions in varying capacities to get things done. This cold war thinking of Republicans fractured the relationship as it drove Pakistan more into Beijing's embrace and tied Pakistan's economic fortune with China. Since the US was in a position of strength and leverage in this asymmetric relationship, the Republican administration in Washington eliminated the possibility of much-necessitated transformation in relations. Interpreting it in another paradigm, Pakistan's domestic environment did not entice America to look toward Pakistan beyond the geopolitical spectacle. Pakistan was not as lucrative as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, which offer a relatively favorable business environment, liberal FDI norms, and low investment risks. The cost and ease of doing business index in Pakistan were unfavorable, and unrelenting political instability further made it worst.

In the last days of President Trump, Pakistan claimed to alter its paradigm from geopolitics to geo-economics where it would be focusing more on investment and connectivity. To materialize such a transition, however, strong institutions, reduced political fracas, and improved digital infrastructure were important; they were essential for tapering off investment risks. Given China's growing economic influence in Asia, the US started to view the South Asian region from a very different angle.<sup>14</sup> In Washington's view, South Asia has now been dissolved into the broader framework of Indo-Pacific where the US was trying to strengthen economic engagements with the counties that were drifting toward China.<sup>15</sup>

For Washington, Pakistan was not a destination that could be Washington's base of growing economic opportunities in the future, given its overwhelming reliance on China. Then, the Chief Executive of the new government in Pakistan was known for his pro-Taliban and anti-drone rhetoric. Despite three meetings between him and Trump, the bilateral relationship did not improve significantly.<sup>16</sup> The two countries had different attributes grounded in value systems, cultural backgrounds, and ideological orientations. Moreover, there were stark differences in political systems and foreign policy decision-making processes. The differences in culture and values created a dichotomy in narratives and orientations. All the domestic elements, therefore, point to the fact that this complex relationship was not only influenced by global and regional geopolitical

---

<sup>14</sup> Lin Wang, "Opportunities and Challenges of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Implications for US Policy and Pakistan," *East-West Center*, (2017)

<sup>15</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "Waylaid by Contradictions: Evaluating Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* (2020), v. 43, no. 4: 123-154; Brian Harding, "The Trump Administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Approach," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2019, no. 1 (2019): 61-67.

<sup>16</sup> Arif Ansar, "Imran-Trump Meeting; US-Pakistan Relations, Afghan Peace, and Kashmir," *Defence Journal* (2019): v. 23, no. 1.

developments and security incongruences but the domestic economic and political environment equally kept the ties impoverished.

If we filter systemic pressures in this bilateral relationship, domestic incompatibilities, and incongruent characteristics barred the two societies from fusing. Holistically, Pakistan's intrinsic importance was relegated, and the overestimation of the US leverage to seek Pakistan's acquiescence negatively affected the relationship that already lacked its own bilateral content and focused on focus security-related issues. This elucidates that in addition to regional geopolitical realities, systemic pressures, perceptual variances, and adverse domestic features deteriorated the relationship in the Trump years.

### **Contrasting US-Pakistan Expectations and its Regional Implications**

Peace and stability in South Asia required sustained cooperation between the US and Pakistan. The US-India Comprehensive Global Partnership is likely to enhance India's political standing at the international level besides helping the current BJP leadership restore its credibility on the domestic front.<sup>17</sup> The US bolstering India's defense capability has landed the region in an unending cycle of the arms race. With the US' unprecedented inclination toward India to advance its interests and downgrading relations with Pakistan, the US has brought the US-China strategic rivalry into this region. In the Sino-Indian border clashes last year, the US support for India was evident. It demonstrated its support for India by sending an aircraft carrier group into the Bay of Bengal for an exercise with the Indian Navy.<sup>18</sup>

China's economic clout in the region surpasses that of the US. It has convinced Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh to be the part of its BRI.<sup>19</sup> Except India and Bhutan, all South Asian states are part of the corridors envisioned under the project. Even in the hostile equation with Beijing, India has over \$90 billion bilateral volume of trade with China. When it comes to Afghanistan, the US had been a key player for years with enormous military presence and diverse assistance. But as situation changed especially after 2006, Beijing also ramped up its engagement with the Afghanistan stakeholders, particularly with the Kabul regime and the Taliban. Beijing has a special interest in Afghanistan as peace in Afghanistan can unlock the opportunity to link CPEC to Afghanistan and eventually, to Central Asian Republics. Therefore, China has tried to

---

<sup>17</sup> Adil Sultan, India-US Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), *Strafasia*, October 28, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Paulina Song, Will US-China Competition Divide South Asia Along Great Power Fault Lines?, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 23, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Chien-Peng (C. P.) Chung, What are the Strategic and Economic Implications for South Asia of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative? *The Pacific Review* (2018), 31:3, 315-332.

maintain its stakes in Afghanistan with the possibility that it would exploit the vacuum created by the US withdrawal.

Owing to Trump's tactical priorities and transactional interests in the region, China strengthened its position in South Asia. The Trump administration had also failed to influence the Taliban in developing an inclusive framework for a political settlement in post-withdrawal Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> China and Pakistan both lamented for US' hasty and irresponsible leaving from Afghanistan. As a result, China and other regional countries will face the inevitable spillover effects of conflict, possibly for many years.<sup>21</sup> The US was poised to withdraw from Afghanistan. If intra-Afghan parties cannot reach a political solution, the region could face the inevitable consequences of uncontrolled chaos.

In parallel, Islamabad finds it challenging to strike a delicate balance between its relations with China and the US. Relations with China are based on mutual understanding and forge a win-win paradigm, while the relations with the US remain grappled with decades of mistrust and disconnected orientations but tactically converged on the Afghan peace process. There is a fundamental difference between the two equations. Due to its extreme reliance on China for its economic, security, and geopolitical interests, Pakistan is unable to determine how to strike this delicate balance. It cannot choose an option that is detrimental to Chinese strategic interests.

Much of the volatility and instability in South Asia can be attributed to a lack of cooperation among the major stakeholders. While the US could have pursued tactical cooperation with China over Afghanistan and crisis management between India and Pakistan, it remained entangled in extending strategic competition with China over land and maritime domains. In the COVID-affected international environment, the US remained almost indifferent to the world and encountered domestically by the catastrophes of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, China assumed the leadership responsibility to help countries in South Asia and beyond in times of crisis.

The US status as a global leader over the past seven decades has been built not just on wealth and power but also, and just as important, on the legitimacy that flows from its domestic governance, provision of global public goods, and ability and willingness to muster and coordinate a global response to crises.<sup>22</sup> It was the greatest test of the Trump administration to show prudence at home and abroad in managing the fallouts of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Ashok Behuria, Yaqoob Ul Hassan, and Sanya Saroha, "US-Taliban Talks for Afghan Peace: Complexities Galore," *Strategic Analysis* (2019), v. 43, no. 2 126-137.

<sup>21</sup> Yun Sun, China's Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan, *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order, *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020.

pandemic and come up with a concerted global response. But it failed to surpass China in providing aid and assistance to affected countries. This further waned the US's global standing and its supremacy over the global political order. This further intensified the US-China leadership competition and in this backdrop, developing states like Pakistan found themselves in the crosshairs.

### **Synthesizing US-Pakistan Perspectives: Rephrasing the Future**

Most viably, if this troubled relationship must sustain and proceed to the smooth trajectory of progression, it is high time that both sides rephrase the contours of this relationship. After the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, both sides need to take a fresh start, moving away from the historical dichotomies and divergences. The interactions between the two premiers over the years have forecasted the notion that the US is in no urgency to move ahead with Pakistan on bilateral terms. Rather Washington would like to have an opportunity where it could possibly maintain some leverage over Pakistan.

At this moment, the immediate success of US-Pakistan relations hinges largely on how Pakistan influences the neighboring Taliban regime to re-posture and re-appropriate itself. Given the Taliban's stubborn policies last year, the gulf between the Taliban and the West has widened. Any possibility of recognition of the Taliban regime anytime soon is unlikely. So long as this phenomenon persists, the perception of policy-makers in Washington will continue to be haunted by the perceived betrayals of the past. If the Taliban wins the confidence of the US by somehow toning down their rhetoric and changing their actions toward more inclusive governance mechanisms, and somehow respecting fundamental human rights, there is a possibility that the US would ramp up its engagement with the Taliban. This will have a positive start for US-Pakistan relations, given that the US now views Pakistan synchronously with its approach toward Afghanistan. This is a window of opportunity but not a perfect option to regain the momentum of the broken relationship. Pakistani policy planners have repeatedly predicted that Islamabad does not want this relationship to proceed in a narrow bandwidth. But it does not want to be in a situation where it is seen as the potential solution for all problems and when the solution does not come it is considered the reason for all evils.<sup>23</sup>

From a geo-economic standpoint, Pakistan is struggling with an on going political crisis where the opposition and the government persistently try to hammer each other by all means. The economy remains in a state of shambles characterized by macroeconomic instability and drying up revenue streams, high business costs, and an insecure investment climate.

---

<sup>23</sup> Moeed Yusuf, U.S.-Pakistan Relations in the Biden Era: A Conversation with Moeed Yusuf, by Michael Kugelman, *Wilson Center*, January 21, 2021.

In such an uncertain domestic environment, why will the US endure risks when it has more to gain in neighbouring India, Bangladesh, or the booming markets of ASEAN? Although Pakistan claims to open to the world with a new thinking based on “geo-economics,” it has failed to acknowledge that mere lofty ideals do not make way but the tangibility of resourcefulness. Pakistan needs to decouple its (existential) insecurities vis-à-vis India from the broader paradigm of security that led it to “invest” in security preferences at the expense of other security dimensions. Apparently, Pakistan has no friends in the Biden administration nor any political capital on Capitol Hill.<sup>24</sup> If it offers something more than words, i.e., real economic incentives, it can make way for policymakers to manage strategic concerns not to dominate its relationship with the US.

Strategically, the US now sees South Asia as a subset region in its Indo-Pacific vision. South Asia’s independent traction has been dissolved in broader regional power politics. Within that region, the US economic focus would be less towards cash-starved countries like Pakistan and more towards technology importers and countries with unique maritime significance. That is the only way Washington could turn the table and compete with China. To keep itself relevant in the power politics of Indo-Pacific, Pakistan would need to swiftly evolve as a destination of inevitable economic importance. Without this, it would be an exaggeration to think of Pakistan’s exclusive relevance in the emerging power politics of the Indo-Pacific region.

## Conclusion

The erroneous calculations and overconfidence of Washington made the ties limited and prone to greater risks than opportunities. The US assumed that Pakistan could not govern itself effectively and empower itself without US support. Its falling reserves, ballooning current account deficit, business development and management practices, and investment imperatives require the US economic interventions in varying capacities to get things done. However, the cold war mindset in Washington will not benefit either side: it will drive Pakistan into Beijing’s embrace and tie its economic fortune with China.

To conceive a truly strategic or sustained relationship requires all aspects of the relationship to be given merited attention rather one-point or uni-focal convergence should decide the trajectory of the relationship. It should not be actor-specific, event-specific, or driven by geopolitical storms. Pakistan always wanted more of an economic, trade, and investment dimension. The US wanted Pakistan’s close cooperation, more often, only with respect to Afghanistan. This is where strategic divergence emerged between the two countries. Pakistan was not willing to cooperate

---

<sup>24</sup> Tom Hussain, *How Will the US-Pakistan Relationship Evolve Under Biden?*, *TRT World*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com>.

with the US in a narrow bandwidth instead it had always anticipated a smooth and sustained relationship that is more of an intrinsic bilateral nature. Therefore, the fundamental goal both administrations should have worked towards could have been having a truly bilateral relationship that does not look at the other side from lens A, B, and C. A relationship not seen through the Afghan prism and not seen as a time-bound partner to advance US interests in the region. Rather exercising leverage to exploit its own interests, Washington should have thought of why China has reaped all benefits of its patronage toward Pakistan which the US could not. The answer to this question is simple power matters but does not decide all matters.<sup>3</sup>

As for Pakistan, it needs to understand that extraneous factors may help us transitorily, but they also constrain it in many ways. Rather than pinning hopes on A, B, or C, it should build its reservoirs of strength and invest in untapped potentials and opportunities. A robust foreign policy rests on a solid domestic base. Countries want to be friends with countries that can do something for them. Pakistan's domestic repositioning—how it will govern itself and whether it can empower itself by building a strong economy—will determine its ability to effectively conduct its foreign policy. Therefore, it must draw red lines to rein in political squabbling and institutional clash. It needs a 10-year course of action to regain its stature in the international arena through concerted efforts, harmonize internal political differences, and rebrand Pakistan as global resource provider. In this age of hybrid warfare, the more a state is vulnerable on domestic fronts, the less capable it will be of diplomatic intercourse. Therefore, Pakistan must realize that interests keep changing, but neighbours are always there. If it intends to expand the benefits of diplomatic outreach, it needs a settled relationship with its immediate neighbours. For that, it needs to mutually-reinforce the relationship with China and reset relations with India on a broader framework, unfettered by geopolitical expediencies. Of course, this would help it better manage its relations with the US.

