

US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Implications for US-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

The United States (US) and Pakistan have witnessed many ebbs and flows in their relations; while both countries enjoyed fruitful partnership during the Cold War era, post-9/11 developments came to re-define their relations. Indeed, Afghanistan has been the main source of strategic mistrust between the two countries, especially as India has also acted to increase its influence in Afghanistan against its rival, Pakistan. More recently, China-Pakistan strategic partnership has further widened the gap between the US and Pakistan. Despite a recent divergence of interests, the two countries have continued their cooperation. However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has further increased the need for close cooperation given the former's implications for Pakistan and the US. In this regard, increasing political stability, economic recession, and rising terrorist attacks are expected to test the relations between the US and Pakistan. This paper aims to investigate the implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan for US-Pakistan relations and the resultant need for Pakistan to review its approach towards the US. The paper employs an interpretative method of investigation which attempts to discover the intentionality of the actors involved, focusing on their values, beliefs, and perceptions. We apply the theories of realism and neo-classical realism that emphasize power politics and the states' interests.

Keywords: U.S, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, implications, dominance, interests

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US-Pakistan Relations: A Brief Overview

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan decided to become an ally of the US. The main purpose of the third partnership, after the 9/11 incidents, was to help the US and other coalition partners to defeat the Taliban and to contain terrorism in Afghanistan. An overwhelming majority of people in Pakistan, including the mainstream political parties in the opposition had supported the decision to be part of the US-led international coalition against transnational terrorism in the region. However, there were many questions on the minds of the ordinary Pakistanis as to what the country was going to gain from becoming an ally of the US. It was asked if the US would help Pakistan clean the economic and political mess in Afghanistan after it had achieved its central objective of the campaign against terrorism? In the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, these questions have become more glaring. Therefore, this paper returns to the questions that are paramount today: What implications does the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan have for the U.S-Pakistan relations? Does the withdrawal necessitate Pakistan to review its approach toward the US?

In 1989, the US left Afghanistan and Pakistan in haste after the world changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Pakistan, however, continued to face the legacy of the war in the form of drug trafficking, the social and economic burden of millions of Afghan refugees on its soil, and the rise of sectarian terrorist outfits within the country (Ikram, 1996). While Pakistan was rewarded with military and economic aid for its support during the Soviet-Afghan war and while the fall of the Soviet Union was welcoming, it nevertheless left Pakistan to face security and economic implications of the war (*The Economic Times*, 2009). The post-Soviet Afghanistan immensely affected Pakistan's internal security and economy. Besides, the trust deficit between the two long-term allies, Pakistan and the US, significantly increased. Indeed, this hasty withdrawal had implications for the US as well including the

threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism that were highlighted after the fall of the Soviet empire; however, the US failed to consider them (Sunawar 2015). As scholars have noted, what the US and other coalition partners faced in Afghanistan after 9/11 was part of the legacy of the Soviet war in Afghanistan; it was their own neglect to address the issue of rebuilding a war-torn Afghanistan that resulted in the intervention of regional actors (Clinton 2014).

However, the post-9/11 incidents once again compelled the US to cooperate with Pakistan. As a result, the US agreed to provide military and economic aid to Pakistan (Hussain, 2008) on definite conditions (Woodward 2010). The US also assured Pakistan all possible assistance to meet its security challenges vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. As such, the trust deficit that had increased after the Cold War was expected to be amended during the so-called war on terror. While the efforts to raise the level of trust and confidence began to show some results, Osama Bin Laden's death in 2011 on the Pakistani soil was a huge blow to the two countries' relationship. This was further worsened by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) attack in Pakistan in 2011 that killed Pakistani soldiers at the Salala Post. Both the developments were considered attacks on "Pakistan's sovereignty" (Firdous 2011). This trust deficit that peaked during Obama's presidency also continued during the Trump era as Trump worked to strengthen relations with India instead of Pakistan. Although a divergence of interests widened the gulf between Pakistan and the US, President Trump soon realized that it was not possible to proceed with his bid to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan without Pakistan's intervention. Therefore, Pakistan was taken on board in the negotiations with Afghan Taliban as the Trump administration needed Pakistan to play its much-needed role in the peace process in Afghanistan. Despite a few turbulent years, Pakistan and the US have reset their relations in 2022 and continue to develop trust and collaboration at the regional level.

In the above context, the main question that this paper considers is why Pakistan supported the US against the Afghan Taliban. In fact, Pakistan extended considerable economic, political, and diplomatic support to the Taliban regime in the 1990s in the hope of securing its strategic interests in Afghanistan against the regional rivals who were also intervening in Afghanistan. Some would contend that Pakistan's support was crucial for the military success of the Taliban against their opponents in Afghanistan (Gul 2002). In reality, Pakistan gained very little. Its dream of opening up to Central Asia remains unrealized. Rather, there was a sentiment of passive hostility toward Pakistan for its support of the Taliban. The regional and extra-regional powers felt offended by Pakistan's failure to influence the Taliban policies (Pyes 2001). Iran and Russia, however, became important factors in Pakistan's foreign policy vis-à-vis the US; however, Pakistan struggled to normalize relations with Russia that certainly frustrated the US.

The central argument of this paper is that all states act as self-centered entities, and relations between any two are based on convergence of interests. Such convergence is conditioned by national, regional, and international factors and how the two states involved in the relationship assess each other's capabilities and objectives for pursuing common interests. Therefore, changing environments compel policymakers to constantly review relations with other countries and explore better avenues for furthering national interests. This is the paradigm that defines relations among all states, and this is equally applicable to the highs and lows in the relations between Pakistan and the US. This paper employs the theory of realism which "suggests that Pakistan identify the dominant powers and either bandwagon with the most powerful or join a coalition to balance against it" (Holland 2021).

Two Decades of War in Afghanistan: Gains and Losses

The twenty-year crisis in Afghanistan involved the entire world strategically. Particularly, the single superpower, the US had been engaged in Afghanistan for twenty years and left it without

providing a comprehensive mechanism in the war-torn country, leaving the region and Afghanistan to suffer strategically. Pakistan and the US both were strategic partners in Afghanistan, collaborating in the war against terrorism. Pakistan was provided with economic assistance whereas the US enjoyed security assistance and intelligence information. During the long war in Afghanistan, the two old allies, US and Pakistan, not only lost the war but also lost their *strategic* trust. The “do more” demand by the US damaged the security arrangement and strengthened the strategic partnership between the US and India. The post-Taliban Afghanistan, empirically, provided a smooth opportunity to India to invest in the country economically and militarily, and use the Afghan soil to achieve its regional strategic interests. The US-India strategic partnership, in turn, greatly reinforced China-Pakistan strategic partnership which annoyed successive US administrations of Trump and Biden.

The US continued its influence to liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban’s power and continued its support to the Afghan governments and the security forces for a strong control against the Taliban. The governments in Afghanistan, under Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, failed to establish their authority and the writ of the state owing to corruption and bad governance (Boone 2010), which resulted in the rise of the Taliban. Afghan Taliban never accepted the US presence and the Afghan governments. To bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, President Obama’s AF-Pak strategy supported recondition “with those local Taliban and other insurgents who were ready to surrender” (Tellies, 2009). The Defence Bill 2009, introduced a new provision that provided economic assistance to the Afghan Taliban who renounced insurgency and protected their own villages. The top US administration hoped that “the Taliban leaders might one day be willing to negotiate,” (Crisis Group,2020) and they needed Pakistan’s support. Although Pakistan enjoyed a certain level of influence over the Taliban, it could not compel them for talks.

Several factors contributed to the US withdrawal from a troubling Afghanistan. The change was triggered by the consistent rise of the Taliban in 2015 and their subsequent recognition as a key player in Afghanistan by major powers and neighboring states. This allowed Pakistan to get squarely back (Baqai & Wasi 2021). Two main external stakeholders, the US and Pakistan, had designated their strategic objectives in Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan is a tribal state and extremely polarized, both Pakistan and the US failed to achieve long-lasting peace and a stable political system due to the corrupt government and weak security forces of Afghanistan (Karimi 2021).

Complex internal cultural dynamics and the Taliban's struggle to liberate their soil from external forces forced the US to directly negotiate with them. Thus, the Trump administration decided to initiate talks with the Taliban for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The Peace Agreement was signed in February 2020 which built a bridge between the US and the Taliban; however, the US withdrawal did not alter the Taliban approach to rule. They continued their old pattern of a "denial" of "the world political map"; and wanted their influence at the regional and global levels (Yousafzai 2022).

Pakistan's neighboring countries, China, Russia, and Iran played their role in developing the peace process between the US and the Taliban. Regional players wanted to eliminate the Taliban regime, but the regional actors also did not want the US's permanent presence in the region or Afghanistan. Unusually, China, Russia, and Iran encouraged peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Pakistan, however, was a key country which led the dialogues (Jamal 2020) despite many concerns. China, on the other hand, despite being actively involved in the peace process in 2016 (Shida 2017) did not figure prominently this time. However, China also wants a peaceful Afghanistan to accomplish its strategic interests grounded in its "Grand Strategy" (Center on International Cooperation 2015). China's worldwide Belt Road Initiative project and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) require for

their success a stable Afghanistan and perpetual peace in the region. As such, the US policy of withdrawal from Afghanistan gave historic opportunity to China to fill the vacuum (Calabrese 2021) in collaboration with Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian states.

Considering the changing dynamics in the regional as well as international politics, President Trump was convinced that the US presence in Afghanistan had greatly damaged the US image in the world; in addition, its economy also suffered at home. Before assuming power, Trump had pledged to protect the lives of the US soldiers and promised to “Rebuild the US” (Pramuk 2017). Soon after becoming the president, Trump criticized the role of its major partner in Afghanistan and accused Pakistan of the persistent rise of terrorism in the country (Gul 2018). Trump’s tilt towards India certainly encouraged Pakistan to review its policy toward the US and engage the regional actors including China and Iran.

Perpetual Instability in Afghanistan and Trump’s Doctrine

For two decades, the two historical strategic partners, the US and Pakistan, were engaged in Afghanistan politically and strategically. Both countries were determined to eliminate the networks of terrorists from a troubling country that had detrimental impacts on regional and global security. Though Al-Qaeda and Taliban’s leadership was eliminated, and the US successfully installed two successive presidents in Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, both failed to reduce the influence of the Taliban. Although in 2009, President Obama had committed to leave Afghanistan before the end of his term, he could not fulfil his promises of the “Afghanistan exit” owing to the internal security environment in Afghanistan. President Obama, however, decreased the number of troops before leaving office (Ryan & Young 2016). Instability continued in Afghanistan as the Afghan government that relied heavily on the US security forces, did not have the capacity to fight the Taliban. Due to the weak security system of Afghanistan, the US soldiers lost their lives in a series of deadly attacks (Center for

Prevention Action, 2022); this loss greatly altered the US policy towards Afghanistan. Though the Afghan president offered peace talks to the Taliban in February 2018, the Taliban did not accept them and continued fighting. President Trump, however, engaged the Taliban and successfully developed trust between the Taliban and the Trump administration.

Trump's desire to withdraw from Afghanistan was not new. In 2013, Trump had said, "the US should leave Afghanistan—it is a complete waste" to be there (Pramuk 2017). The US troops and NATO forces both faced strong resistance from the Taliban and the militants. Significantly, Trump's opinion was backed by the sentiments of the American people; according to a survey report, 47% of the US people were of the view that the US had made a mistake by sending its soldiers into Afghanistan (Newport 2021). Thus, Trump initiated a deal with the Taliban that took nine rounds of talks over 18 months. During the talks, Trump also secretly invited the Taliban to Camp David (Philip, 2012). Trump wanted to end the "endless war" and said, "we cannot be the policeman for the world" (Holland 2020). Trump also continued to blame Pakistan for harboring terrorist networks and increasing violence and extremism in Afghanistan. He criticized the three main regional players, China, Russia, and Iran, and said that although they all "have had stakes in Afghanistan's stability," they are not contributing enough to provide security (Grandpre 2017). Trump's concern was legitimate; he argued that if India, Russia, and China were not contributing to Afghanistan's security then why should the US remain in a troubling country? Trump did not want to continue his predecessors' policy to invest more in a country they had already invested \$2trillion dollars in (Sabga 2021). Pakistan's political leadership was also reluctant to continue the partnership in Afghanistan. Pakistan had refused to provide its bases to the US to take action against the terrorist networks in Afghanistan; as a result, Biden administration followed his predecessor's policy to withdraw from Afghanistan. After Pakistan's refusal, the US had no option except to pull out its forces from a troubling soil.

Trump's Peace Process and Biden's Action: The End of the Twenty-Year War

In 2017, the Taliban released the American family that was kidnapped in 2012 and was later rescued by the Pakistani forces during an operation (BBC 2017). It was a turning point in Pak-US relations because Trump, who had been blaming Pakistan and its security forces, appreciated Pakistan's contribution in helping the hostage American family in Afghanistan. To end the long war as well as instability in Afghanistan, both the US and Pakistan wanted the Taliban to accept a peace mechanism. The Trump administration¹ and the Pakistani establishment played their role in drafting an acceptable peace deal for the Taliban. After marathon meetings between the parties, the US, the Taliban, and Pakistan, the final peace agreement was signed in Doha, Qatar in February 2020. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, signed the historic agreement with the Taliban; politically, this deal was seen as a compromise and a "give and take" by the two powerful parties (State Government, 2020). Joe Biden replaced Trump in 2020; Biden also wanted to leave Afghanistan, but he did not wait till 30th September and pulled the US soldiers out before the deadline.

However, President Biden categorically ignored to take Pakistan on board while withdrawing from Afghanistan; his hasty decision stunned everyone at home and abroad. Biden faced criticism by the Congressman, Lindsey Graham, who believed that the withdrawal without Pakistan's coordination was a mistake (The Tribune Express, 2021). Many experts think that the US did not want to disclose its departure time from Afghanistan; therefore, it did not even inform the Afghan government about its swift withdrawal from Kabul which resulted in chaos and insecurity in the country for both Afghans and foreign nationals.

Pakistan's role has been critical and influential in supporting the Taliban's cause to return to power. For twenty years, Pakistan has been an active, vigilant, and prudent actor in Afghanistan. Pakistan not only supported the US in Afghanistan, but it also defended its

own interests vis-à-vis Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Both India and the TTP were collaborating against Pakistan and using Afghanistan's soil in this regard (Akhtar 2019). Besides, India and the US had developed strong strategic nexus that annoyed Pakistan. Consequently, Pakistan did not want the US presence in Afghanistan which would strengthen Pakistan's rivals. Pakistan officially applauded when the US withdrew its forces from Afghanistan and also welcomed the Afghan Taliban's return to power. Pakistan's response annoyed the US (Ashraf 2022) that considered it an anti-US stance, which further increased distance between the two countries.

Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Challenges for Pakistan

Historically, all conflicts and wars need dialogue for peace and progress. The twenty-year Afghanistan crisis has proved that powerful states also need talks for peace because stability and progress cannot be achieved with war. Nevertheless, the peace deal between the Taliban and the US, indeed, strengthened the Taliban's position and control in the establishment of an Islamic Emirate (Thier 2020). The US and Pakistan did not consider the possibility of a Taliban takeover, a Taliban state, and its repercussions. But soon it transpired that the Afghan government and security forces had lost their legitimate control over their territory which resulted in the Taliban re-take on August 15, 2021.

Biden's hasty decision to withdraw from Afghanistan seriously sabotaged the security situation in Afghanistan as well as the entire region. The new waves of terrorism significantly increased the rift between the US and Pakistan. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan faced an unexpected crisis. Amid chaos, the US soldiers and nationals were provided protection by the Pakistani government (Khan 2021). Pakistan, however, faced its own security dilemma after the US withdrawal. Security was threatened when the new terror attacks occurred across the border and an outfit, Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP), declared war against the US and the Taliban that had established an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

This group attacked the Kabul airport during the US's hurried departure and killed 170 people. ISKP is an increasing threat to Pakistan. Since the TTP had deep associations with al-Qaeeda and ISKP (Sayed 2021), Pakistan was facing security challenges internally from the terrorist networks collaborating to achieve their regional and global goals. Since then, the TTP has become active and continues to threaten Pakistan. Afghanistan under the Taliban rule has increased security concerns at both the regional and global levels. Pakistan's security, in particular, has been seriously affected by the TTP that has a base in Afghanistan, and there have been several incidents of cross-border attacks. Talks with the TTP, managed by the Afghan Taliban, have failed, and Afghan Taliban are reluctant to evict the TTP from Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban's support to the TTP has in turn further increased Pakistan's security concerns. Taliban's isolation from world politics, its weak state capacity, and the challenge of Islamic State (IS) have increased in recent years and continue to seriously threaten regional security. Pakistan supported the peace deal for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan and expected the Taliban to evict the TTP commanders or take action against anti-Pakistan organizations hiding in Afghanistan. The Taliban's unfriendly response disappointed Pakistan as well as its people who had been sympathizing with the Taliban until their victory (Afridi 2022).

The post-withdrawal Afghanistan has become, unexpectedly, more unsafe and unstable from the Pakistani perspective because the Taliban's victory has galvanized the TTP (Haqqani 2022), and given terrorists an opportunity to cross the borders to attack Pakistani security forces and installations in Pakistan's troubling areas such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The TTP has become active and started attacks on the security forces; its activities have increased through fund raising and recruitment beyond the tribal areas. The ISKP has also been attacking inside Pakistan; in fact, this terrorist organization claimed responsibility of the deadly attack on a Shiite mosque in Peshawar in March 2022 (Ahmad 2022). A report mentions that 272 terror attacks have

taken place inside Pakistan between August 2021 and March 2022, which continuously challenge Pakistan's security. Once again, like the post-Cold War scenario, militancy and terrorism have increased after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan is once again facing security threats from its hostile neighboring countries, and its Eastern and Western borders continue to be vulnerable.

Presently, Pakistan is facing challenges in reshaping its policy towards the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Although Pakistan continues to support the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, its own internal security has been endangered by the TTP with a strong base in Afghanistan. The TTP is operating from across the border and the Taliban's reluctance to evict the TTP has amplified the gap between the Taliban and Pakistan. Pakistan also has concerns about Afghanistan's internal stability, which may lead to another political and security dilemma in the region. On the one hand, the Afghan Taliban believe that Pakistan is supporting the US against the Afghan Taliban and continues to provide its airspace to the US drones to launch attacks in Afghanistan, which killed Al-Qaeda leader Al Zahwari in June 2022 (Gul 2022). On the other hand, Pakistani defense Minister blamed Afghanistan's government for increasing terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. The TTP and other terrorist networks are closely collaborating and facilitating inside Afghanistan and across the border.

The TTP, ideologically aligned with the Afghan Taliban, has initiated new attacks on the Pakistani security forces. The Afghan Taliban forced the TTP to negotiate and stop attacks in Pakistan. Consequently, a truce agreement was signed between the TTP and the Pakistani establishment in June 2022. But the TTP ended the agreement on November 28, 2022, after the government's rejection to accept their unconstitutional demands. More recently, the Afghan Taliban have been facilitating talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government. The current government of Shahbaz Sharif sent the minister of state affairs to discuss cross-border terrorism with the Afghan Taliban; however, her visit failed to

address the situation, and the TTP continues attacks in the most troubling areas in Pakistan.

Indeed, it was the US withdrawal from Afghanistan that inspired the TTP which rigorously continued attacks in 2021. The Afghan Taliban announced a ceasefire between the TTP and Pakistani forces (Shaikh 2022); however, it failed. The TTP deployed modern technology and weapons abandoned by the US forces that were also transferred to the separatists in Balochistan (Shoaib, 2022). Pakistan facilitated both the US and the Afghan Taliban in 'peace talks', knowingly that Afghanistan's land would not be used by the terrorists as the Taliban had agreed; however, the Afghan Taliban continue to provide political and military support to the Pakistani Taliban (Rana, 2022).

Likewise, the Taliban failed to eliminate the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which is allied with ISIS-ETIM and is considered a threat to China's security. This is an organization of Uyghur Jihadists (warriors) that can intercept China via the Wakhan Corridor (Adeel & Kidwai, 2021). Turkistan Tehreek and the TTP both claimed the Dasu attack which resulted in the death of Chinese nationals; the attack by a Baloch female suicide bomber on a Chinese female teacher at Karachi University; and the attack on the Chinese deputy minister in Quetta. The TTP and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) strengthened the network against China's interests in Pakistan (Basit & Pantucci 2021). This network collaborates to carry out attacks in Pakistan (Afridi 2020). ETIM would not stop its militancy in Afghanistan whereas the TTP is attacking Pakistani forces at Lakki Marwat, Bannu, KP, and Balochistan.

The recent resurgence of TTP in Swat exacerbated resentment in the people of Swat who sacrificed much during an operation against TTP in 2009. Withdrawal from Afghanistan encouraged the TTP to return to their lost areas to challenge the state and to reclaim its authority and resume extortion and attacks. However, this time people reacted differently; instead of leaving their houses,

they demanded the Pakistani government to protect their lives and stop negotiating with the TTP (Khan 2022). Sami Yousafzai, An expert on Afghanistan and Taliban said in an interview that the Afghan Taliban will not expel Pakistani Taliban because they consider them their allies who fought against the US forces in Afghanistan (Yousafzai 2022). The Taliban believe that they can survive without the international recognition. In the future, the ISKP and likeminded Afghanistan-based organizations may attack Pakistan, Iran, and some Central Asian States to establish the “Caliphate” (Yousafzai 2022). Russia, China, and Pakistan may prevent the threat if they have a collaborative strategy to eliminate the menace of terrorism from the region. Similarly, the rising waves of terrorism and the Taliban’s support to the networks may bring back the US in the region. The US only pulled out its forces and has not completely withdrawn. Antony Blinkon said in an interview that “we are not leaving. We remain deeply engaged when it comes to supporting Afghanistan-we are staying in the game” (Iqbal 2021).

Biden’s Policy and Pakistan: Conflictual Factors

President Biden inherited Trump’s legacy and continued his hard policy towards Pakistan. His decision to refrain from calling the Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, after assuming office reflected this stance. Biden called a number of world leaders including Pakistan’s rival India’s prime minister Narendra Modi; however, he did not speak to Khan. This hard stance was further exacerbated by the realization that Pakistan’s security was seriously compromised after the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. Pakistan’s acute security dilemma and the economic crisis forced the previous and the present governments to revisit Pakistan’s relations with the regional actors. In particular, balancing its orientation with China, Russia, India, and Iran in the region was the best option to improve its security and economy. The former Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), Qamar Javed Bajwa, outlined his doctrine in March 2021 during the Islamabad Security

Dialogue and gave his geo-economic vision that outlined four main pillars (Dawn, 2021):

- Moving towards lasting and enduring peace within and outside
- Non-interference of any kind in the internal affairs of our neighboring and regional countries
- Boosting intra-regional trade and connectivity
- Bringing sustainable development and prosperity through the establishment of investment and economic hubs within the region

Though Pakistan had set its preferences to achieve peace and stability diplomatically, this did not work. Pakistan's new paradigm shift in its foreign policy towards Russia, was not appreciated by the US. We identify four fundamental factors in creating a mistrust between the US and Pakistan relations: Pakistan's friendly behavior towards the Taliban and Afghanistan; Pakistan's tilt towards Russia; Pakistan's perpetual strategic partnership with China; and Pakistan's refusal to provide military bases to the US. Prime Minister Khan congratulated President Biden as such: "Look forward to working with the president of the US in building a strong Pak-US partnership through trade and economic relationship" (*The Times of India*, 2021). Pakistan viewed the new US president through the Afghanistan lens and the then National Security Advisor, Moaheed Yousaf, said, "If a phone call is a concession, if a security relationship is a concession, Pakistan has options" (Yousaf, 2021). Prime minister Khan strongly fortified the Taliban's victory over the US withdrawal saying: "Taliban have broken the chain of slavery" (Muzaffar 2021), however, he also criticized the use of force against the Taliban. If Pakistan's security and political establishment had provided bases to the US to take action against terrorist networks in Afghanistan, the US would not have pulled its forces from Afghanistan. Prime Minister Khan sent a firm message to the Biden administration that he would "absolutely not" allow the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct counter-terrorism

operations from Pakistan's territory (Dawn, 2021). Many scholars and analysts view Khan's statement as a contributing factor to the cold relations between the US and Pakistan during the early period of Biden's presidency.

Increasing Mistrust and Issues

Thus, the mistrust between the US and Pakistan continued to increase. In December 2021, the Biden administration organized the first ever "Summit for Democracy" and invited global leaders including Pakistan. However, China, and Russia were excluded. Keeping in view the regional security and the political developments, Pakistan refused to participate in the virtual conference (Yousaf 2021). Pakistan believed that India's presence in the same conference was a denial of the theme of the conference, for India had committed human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir—a disputed territory between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's refusal to attend the conference widened the gap between the two strategic partners. The US believed that Pakistan was behind the attacks in Afghanistan and continued collaboration with the Taliban. Thus, an anti-Pakistan Bill was presented by the Republican Congressmen to designate Pakistan as a "terrorist sponsor state"; the Bill also proposed sanctions on the Afghan Taliban and on the governments including Pakistan that "supported the Taliban" (Hussain 2021).

The US considered Pakistan's assistance to the Taliban as one of the main reasons for its departure from Afghanistan. However, Pakistan believed the TTP's insurgency within Pakistan was a backlash to the country's support of the US in Afghanistan. Now, Pakistan wants a broad-based relationship with the US focused on geo-economics (Afzal, 2021). Although the Biden administration had limited its engagement with Pakistan, the US needs to bear in mind the regional scenario that involves Pakistan, India, China, and Iran (Afzal 2022).

Pakistan is also facing a tough time in harmonizing the relations between the two major powers—China and the US. The former

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Prime Minister, Imran Khan, wanted to establish cordial relations with Russia to meet the country's energy crisis. His tilt towards Russia displeased the US. Khan's government also did not condemn the Russian invasion in Ukraine that was demanded of Khan's government. Pakistan's close relations with China and a quest in developing its relationship with Russia annoyed the US.

Besides, President Biden was irked by Pakistan raising its nuclear issue; during the Congressional Campaign Committee, he said that Pakistan's nuclear weapons were not safe, and that it was the most dangerous place in the world (Hussain 2022). Biden's statement drew criticism from the Pakistani political leadership; Pakistan's foreign office also summoned the US ambassador to protest over the 'biased' attitude towards Pakistan. Pakistani foreign minister said: "If there is any question of nuclear safety then they should ask our neighboring country, India, who accidentally fired a missile into Pakistan's territory" (Aljazeera, 2022). Soon, the US state department defused tension between the two countries by declaring that Pakistan as a nuclear state is a responsible country and that the US has been viewing Pakistan as a secure and critical ally who is confident about its secure nuclear assets (Hussain 2022). This US official statement helped ease the tension.

Pakistan's internal politics also remains a complex factor in shaping the relations between the US and Pakistan. Serious tension increased when Prime Minister Khan faced a "No Confidence Vote" in Parliament in March 2022, which his government lost. An alliance of fourteen opposition parties formed a new government. The former Prime Minister believed that the US encouraged the opposition parties in ousting his government because the US did not like his policies, particularly his visit to Russia. Amid the Ukraine crisis, Khan's visit to Russia upset the US and the European countries. They wanted Pakistan to condemn Russia's invasion against Ukraine. Khan responded by asking if the Pakistanis are their slaves to be doing as the US bids (NDTV, 2022). His statement was viewed as being against diplomatic norms. At the United Nations forum, Pakistan carefully defended

its position and did not condemn Russia. Pakistan's envoys said: "Pakistan upheld the principle of equal and indivisible security for all" (Yousaf 2022). These factors were irritants in rebuilding the relationship between the US and Pakistan.

Internally, Khan's government was facing immense criticism from opposition parties and the media. His tilt towards China also distanced the US from Pakistan. During the Parliamentary session on foreign policy and economy, many politicians were concerned that "complete strategic alliance with China would invite the wrath of the US (Yousaf 2021).¹ Pakistani political leaders believe that the US holds the key in the top monetary institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). During and after Khan's government's dismissal, Pakistan had been facing issues with the IMF and the FATF. FATF placed Pakistan on the gray list and imposed tough conditions to comply. After Khan's departure, the US aided Pakistan to be removed from FATF's gray list. It looked likely that if Khan's government continued its stance, prospects of any positive development on the Pakistan-US ties were grim. Sanctions as well as coercive tactics through IMF and FATF could seriously harm Pakistan's interests (Kamran Yousaf 2022).

Redefining the Relations

The Biden administration had stopped its engagement with Khan's government. Khan's ouster divided the Pakistani people into the pro-US and the anti-US groups. The US diplomat, Donald Lu, was considered to have played a role in the success of the No Confidence Movement against Khan. Khan himself accused the US and the Pakistani establishment of removing him from office, but the US spokesperson denied Khan's allegation. Pakistani analysts stated that Khan shifted the blame to gain popularity (Qayum and Kate 2022). Khan is of the view that owing to the US and the military establishment, Pakistan could not have its

independent foreign policy unlike India. Despite its strategic partnership, India has the power to say 'no to the US' whereas Pakistan still needs its independent foreign policy in developing its relationship with world powers like China and Russia.

The post-Khan government and Pakistan's security establishment attempted to normalize relations with the US. Both civil-military leadership re-set the US-Pakistan ties and determined to continue their relations. The US greeted the change of command in Pakistan. Before his retirement, the former Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General Bajwa, had started bridging the gap between the two countries. During his official visit to the US, COAS reaffirmed the close ties that had been strained after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US expected Pakistan to control the jihadist activities under the Afghan Taliban that may promote transnational terrorist networks whereas Pakistan sought the US help against the TTP that has threatened Pakistan's security and is targeting its troubling areas in KP and Balochistan.

Conclusion

Despite US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power, the US continues to be invested in the stability of Afghanistan in order to prevent the country from harboring terrorists. The sudden withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan had seriously increased mistrust and tension between the US and Pakistan. But rationality prevailed eventually and both countries re-set their bilateral relations for stable peace in the region. Both countries want to counter the rising waves of terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is an important country in the region, and it can play a key role as a mediator between the US and the de facto Taliban government in Kabul. Pakistan will continue to be an important ally to the US in its efforts to address the humanitarian crisis triggered by its hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. In return for its assistance, Pakistan can count on Washington and its affiliated international financial institutions, the IMF and the WB, to continue to provide financial

assistance. In the meantime, the US withdrawal has created a vacuum for regional actors to redefine the regional order. China and Russia both have strong strategic partnerships and common interests in Afghanistan. Likewise, Iran has developed security and economic ties with China. These players may not let the US dominate. Therefore, the US-Pakistan strategic partnership may continue to balance the regional order and peace in South Asia. Afghanistan, however, under the Taliban may not let any regional actor to influence Afghanistan's internal and external political environment, which continues to be a challenge.

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