



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Pakistan-US Relations Under Donald Trump

Najam Rafique, Director (Research), ISSI

January 04, 2017

“Unpresidential” was one of the many labels assigned to Donald Trump over his election trail. His debates and knowledge of foreign policy issues too did very little to inspire confidence in his abilities as president. Yet, the results came as a surprise to almost everybody across America and the world. But the 'Trump' card is now on the table and both the Americans and the world waits with bated breath for the 'Donald Doctrine' and his approach to many challenging issues, particularly with regard to his foreign policy.

What will be the new president's approach to the issues confronting South Asia, and, in particular, his approach to relations with Pakistan. Over the decades since 1947, the nature of this relationship has emerged as a 'transactional' one based on the priorities of the national interest of both the countries. The case of Raymond Davis, Abbottabad and Salala notwithstanding, both countries have now embarked upon a relationship under the rubric of rejuvenated Strategic Dialogue that seeks to diversify the nature of mutual interaction away from security oriented approach to one based on non-traditional cooperation in a number of fields including education, energy, trade and scientific cooperation.

What then will be the course of relations between Pakistan and the United States once the new president-elect, Donald Trump takes office in January 2017? While his telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on November 30 has given rise to many a speculations, Trump himself has assured the Prime Minister that, “I am ready and willing to play any role that you want me to play to address and find solutions to the outstanding problems.”¹ The Prime Minister is also expect to attend the inauguration ceremony at the White House on January 20, 2017. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister, Mr. Tariq Fatami is already in Washington to get acquainted with the incoming administration and clear the grounds for a revived relationship between Pakistan and the US.

Analysts in Pakistan are now rushing to figure out to what extent Donald Trump's words will translate into actions.

The Nature of Trump Foreign Policy

The conventional wisdom is that Trump's foreign policy worldview, if implemented, would diverge significantly from post-World War II US foreign policy. But the extent to which this is true is not as clear

¹ Pakistan: Trump Told PM He Will 'Address and Find Solutions' to Country's 'Outstanding Problems', *ABCNews*, November 30, 2016. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pakistan-trump-told-pm-address-find-solutions-country/story?id=43884843>

as it seems, particularly if one was to go by Trump's emphasis during his election debates: "I'm not running to be president of the world, I'm running to be president of the United States of America."² His debates with Hillary Clinton too were based on a bleak assessment of America's position in the world today, a narrow interpretation of US interests, and a transactional approach in dealing with the international community. It is a far cry from what we are used to hearing from traditional US presidential candidates, who rarely questioned American exceptionalism and indispensability in the world or the alliances and free trade agreements that form the bedrock of US commitment to the liberal world order.

Trump fleshed out this view in an April 27 address at the Center for the National Interest,³ a Washington DC based think tank. In that speech, Trump argued that US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era had been wasteful, rudderless, unreliable, and ineffective. By contrast, Trump said he would focus more narrowly on rebuilding America's military and economy, curbing the spread of radical Islam, and fashioning what he called a "new rational American foreign policy," which some have also since somewhat loosely termed a version of realism. Even as Trump sought to clarify his foreign policy approach, it would be like reading the 'tea leaves' to figure out the foreign policy approach of the new administration. Much will depend on the key figures that are appointed, particularly to the portfolios of the departments of State and Defence. Also, one would need to sift through the fog of the contradictory election rhetoric and the clarity that is required once Trump takes charge of the White House.

Not much is known about ability of the candidates whose names have been circulating for the posts in charge of foreign and security policy. It is not clear, therefore, to what extent Trump and his team would actually be wedded to acting on the views that the former has expressed. Though some of his views may be long-held, he has never been in government, and the personal opinions he had while being a businessmen and television celebrity may evolve once he assumes the presidency and has to think about the national interest. He has also demonstrated a tendency to flip-flop on certain issues, and there is often a divergence between what he says and what his aides claim he means to say.

² "Trump: I'm running to be president of the U.S., not the world", *Washington Examiner*, September 14, 2016. <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-im-running-to-be-president-of-the-u.s.-not-the-world/article/2601862>

³ "Trump on Foreign Policy", *The National Interest*, April 27, 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>

This is relevant for the foreign and security policy of the United States generally and regional issues particularly. The policy towards the South Asian region will not be an exception. Neither president-elect Trump nor his pick-ups have deep understanding of this region and strategy here. Much will have to be learned on the job and their real involvement in South Asian affairs, though most are probably familiar only with the headline-grabbing statements about US alliances and nuclear weapons rather than how the region factors into Trump's overall worldview and what that means for his likely South Asia policy. With Trump set to take office in January 2017, it is worth taking a closer look at what America's new president might do in the region.

Relations with Pakistan

With the uncertainties surrounding Trump and his team one can only make humble speculations about what will happen with regard to US policy towards South Asia, and what can Pakistan expect from President Donald Trump?

To be sure, the trend lines towards Pakistan established during the last ten years are too deeply entrenched to change over the course of the new president. There may, however, be differences in degree rather than any course corrections. Pakistan has already been under pressure over its counter-terrorism policy and hosting groups like Jaish and Kashkar-i-Tayyibya that have been accused of carrying out attacks against India.

On a positive note, Trump has demonstrated sensitivity to address the outstanding issue of Pakistan with regard to relations with India specifically.

Even as the US adjusts its relations with India in terms of developing a strategic partnership with that country, Trump cannot ignore Pakistan in the region for several reasons.

Firstly, the stabilisation of the region without involving Pakistan is going to be difficult. In order for this to happen, it is extremely important that the Trump administration have a balanced approach to its relations with both Pakistan and India, the two rival nuclear powers in South Asia. This would not only be an important decision for peace between the two arch rivals in South Asia, but equally important for the stabilization of Afghanistan.

Secondly, the trade routes being established under the CPEC project will be equally important for a businessman like Donald Trump. Pakistan will be an important trade route of the future, and the new

administration has the opportunity to become partners in the regional connectivity. This will certainly be consistent with the US policy of interconnecting South Asia and Central Asia while keeping Afghanistan and Pakistan at the centre. In her visit to the Subcontinent in July, 2011, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Pakistan to consider her proposal for a 'New Silk Road' that would connect Pakistan, India and Afghanistan with Central Asia. Stable relations between Pakistan and India will help boost commerce across Central Asia, including Afghanistan and arch-rivals Pakistan and India.

Thirdly, the US projects like the New Silk Road is also supported by China, which has launched a number of projects in the region under the One Belt One Road initiative. America views the CPEC as an opportunity as well. Though Trump has expressed concerns about the future profile of China, but at the same time China's involvement in the region will be a stabilising factor. The US could benefit itself and the region from the CPEC by launching a partnership with Pakistan and China. Though Donald Trump has certain reservations over business with China, nevertheless, Washington and Beijing have a long-standing history of managing ties effectively.

Being a businessman, Trump knows the importance of peace and stability for the sake of trade and growth. The CPEC and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme could be utilised for realising the US dream of inter-connecting Central Asia and South Asia.

The US wishes to have strong trade ties in the region — and it would not be fruitful if the Afghanistan-Pakistan region remains unstable — especially if India would be in clash with the latter. The mistrusts between India and Pakistan could damage the US interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia too.

Stabilizing relations between Pakistan and India will be an important challenge for Trump. What is important to note is that Pakistan aspires for talks with India for revamping ties despite the hostile approach that India has currently adopted on the Line of Control and in occupied Kashmir. Recently, Pakistan tried to attract the world's attention toward its issues with India especially Kashmir. However, India has delayed resumption of dialogue with Islamabad for one reason or the other. Trump's expressed support for addressing the outstanding issues of Pakistan in the region is therefore a welcome step in the right direction.

Fourth, counterterrorism operations will also likely be under constant review, including aid to Pakistan. As under the Obama administration, Pakistan will most likely be asked to 'do more' from a Republican Congress empowered by a Republican president.

Given the great many unknowns at this point in time, for Pakistan too, this is a time for some serious introspection. The government in Islamabad must use the time between now and the January inauguration to set out the priorities of its relations with the new administration and strategically plot a decisive roadmap for bilateral engagement as well as contingencies for Pakistan-US ties over whatever path Trump takes. As India steps up its diplomatic outreach for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), it will be important for Pakistan to continue to lobby for a criteria-based approach to the 48-nation cartel and find new and effective ways to engage global powers, while leveraging its geostrategic location as a key player in the evolving Asian order. While the US-India partnership is unlikely to undergo major reversals, the rise of China and the security situation in Afghanistan are likely to remain the enduring filters through which a strident Republican Presidency will view Pakistan and adapt its strategic interests in South Asia.

To reiterate, there has been no coherent statement by President-elect Trump that can be used to decipher his likely foreign policy priorities in South Asia. In such a scenario, the Pakistan-US relationship is most likely to continue on the course set under the Obama administration.

It is unlikely that there will be a fundamental change in US policy towards Pakistan. US geostrategic objectives will remain the same. India will continue to be America's favoured and preferred partner for various reasons, while the containment of China will frame Washington's broader focus in the region. Pakistan will remain an important partner, but the brief to President Trump by the policymakers in Washington on past and current issues between Pakistan and the United States may generally be negative, and it is in this context that his conversation with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif should be viewed.

As pointed out in the discussion above, for the time being there are too many unknowns to be certain of how the Pakistan-US relationship under Trump will play out. The fact that the administration under Obama chose to develop a robust relationship with India, it is likely that the new administration may choose to follow an India-first policy, but this may not necessarily translate into any desire to cut off ties with Pakistan.

Even as policy shifts are likely to be gradual in South Asia, Pakistan can expect increased pressure to clamp down on anti-India militant groups and less support in Washington for continued civilian and military assistance for Pakistan exemplified by Republican Congressmen like Ted Poe and Dana Rohrabacher. Trump will likely continue with a transactional approach to bilateral engagements, and Pakistan could secure targeted military assistance in exchange for specific counterterrorism initiatives, for example, against the Haqqani Network of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). For all practical purposes, Pakistan should not expect anything new to emerge with Trump in the White House. If anything, the year 2017 will be the beginning of another challenging four years for the US-Pakistan relationship.