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Disengaging from Afghanistan

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President Donald Trump's statement that Pakistan has been harbouring terrorists on its soil, created much nationalistic hype in Pakistan. Diplomatic contacts have reached their lowest ebb in recent years. Pakistan's Foreign Office cancelled the scheduled visit of the Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Alice Wells' trip, at the eleventh hour on 27 August; which marks the first dent on diplomatic ties after Trump's statement. In the past, Pakistan has been more complacent in its relations with the US; accepting the American blame-games and failures of its policies in Afghanistan. Pakistan's reactions this time may affect relations between Islamabad and Washington in the long run.

In the 1950s, Pakistan required American weapons to respond to India. Ayub Khan's 'Friends Not Masters' reasoning troubled the ties for the first time in the 1960s after which Washington had put an embargo on Pakistan. But Pakistan's military dependency on the United States still did not decline.

In the 1970s, Pakistan disassociated from US policy under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to become more aligned with China. However, shortly after Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Pakistan proved to be a trusted ally of the United States. And has remained so since then.

During 1979-2017 there was much tumult in Pak-US relations. This was during the height of American sanctions on Pakistan. During 1965-2001 relations were marked by embargo and sanctions but it was also remembered as the honey-moon period between the two countries. The sanctions included Symington, Pressler and Glenn amendments adopted by the US Congress. The F-16 fiasco also happened during this time when America refused to supply F-16s and instead offered wheat to Pakistan. Under the Bush administration aid and weapons supply was discontinued.

The US alleged Pakistan's involvement in the nuclear program. The United States also pressurised its allies, IMF and World Bank not to issue loans with certain conditions. However, in order to continue the 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan, limited military and economic aid continued but with certain conditions.

Throughout these years, the US-Pakistan relations were conditional. It was not an independent and transparent relationship. There were certain grey areas. These relations never remained balanced or equitable and Pakistan was not in a position to say no to America. Now the blame-game and harsh words are meant to pressurise Pakistan to silently pursue American dictates on Afghanistan, which the government has taken a stand against as dependency on American military and economic aid has steadily declined.

Let's also try to grasp the emerging geo-politics of western Asia and China where Pakistan is so closely knitted. American plans are unsympathetic, insensitive, and fault-finding in Afghanistan.

It is doubtful whether America has any plans of bringing peace in Afghanistan. America wants to use Afghan soil as a long-term battle-ground to destabilize Pakistan, then cause an upset in Western China's Xinjiang province, and later fragment 'the Central Asian Republics. However, China and Russia are already threatening American supremacy with the rise of Asia in the 21st century.

This strategy would foil the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plan of peaceful co-existence. The geo-strategic game is much bigger than it appears on the map. The complicated situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, limited role of China in Afghanistan, and Russia's reduced involvement, fulfils Washington's dream of destabilising western Asia and China and Asia's fragmentation and disintegration.

Pakistani policy-makers have to tread carefully in dealing with Trump's threat and its fallout on the regional scenario rather than be moved by emotional rhetoric and propaganda. China and Russia are carefully responding to the situation.

There are new options for Pakistan to play its legitimate role in Afghanistan. Firstly, Pakistan should detach itself from Afghanistan and align with China, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics. The so-called phenomena of the 'key role' of Pakistan has in the resolution of the Afghan stalemate should be finished / buried once for all. The role of regional powers of Afghanistan should be focussed on.

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