

Presidential Change in the US: Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

The recent Republican win of Donald Trump, as the new President of the US, has raised several questions about what shape the Pak-US relations will take under the Trump administration. Analysts, policy makers and the general public have been sceptical about the new Republican nominee's stance towards Pakistan, as has been evident from his previous statements. Also, since the US policy has not been a balanced one in recent years, owing to the situation in the region, it is pertinent to note that in recent times, the US has also been largely tilted towards Pakistan's arch rival — India. Moreover, the decisive factors, likely to influence relations between the two countries, are the rise of China and the security situation in Afghanistan through which a not so pro-Pakistan, the Republican presidency will view the country and adjust its strategic interests to this part of the world. Counterterrorism operations are likely to be under constant review, as well as aid to Pakistan. The “do more” phenomenon is expected to reverberate with more enthusiasm from a Republican Congress backed by a Republican president. The most likely implication for Pakistan can be of extreme disengagement in case the Trump presidency decides to isolate the country, but a total cut off is not likely due to Pakistan's strategic location. This paper attempts to discuss what could be the possible implications for Pakistan while keeping in view that the Trump administration has assumed power recently. The Trump administration has largely been silent on its Pakistan policy, with the exception of a few statements.

Keywords: US, Pakistan, Pak-US Relations, Aid, Counterterrorism Cooperation.

Introduction

Pakistan's relationship with the US has often been described as unstable, reactive and need-based. The relations between the two countries have often waxed and waned, given the situation in the region. Successive US

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administrations have at times imposed sanctions on Pakistan, thus resulting in a period signifying a rough patch in a long relationship. Developments in the region have largely impacted the nature of the relationship between the US and Pakistan, an example of which can be the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and September 11, 2001, attacks on the US. Just as the US is drawn into the theater of war in the South Asian region, it has been imperative to cooperate with Pakistan, without which it would have been inherently difficult for the US to proceed with its objectives.

In this scenario, Pakistan should muster efforts to convince the US about its counterterrorism initiatives, also aimed at giving support to the coalition forces. Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia and Iran — the two other players the US will look to define and work on diplomatic arrangements, which will allow Pakistan's leadership the space to help link global security and counter terror efforts abroad. Therefore, Pakistan must think of ways to engage Washington, even when interests between the two countries do not converge.

On the other hand, it can be seen that, as always, the factor of unpredictability in the Pak-US relations will hold sway. The geostrategic objectives of the US are likely to remain the same under a Republican administration and as a result, India is likely to be the favoured partner in the region and the liaison is likely to become stronger. The economic prospects of China and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is likely to keep Washington engaged in the region. In this regard, the containment of China is the major factor which will be instrumental in keeping the US attention in the region. Therefore, it is very important for Pakistan to engage the new Republican administration and develop linkages to strengthen the relationship.

Since Pakistan is a strategically and politically important country for the US, both countries have remained disenchanted allies throughout their uneasy history, and Pakistan has not augured well in the US policy making circles, and is best perceived in a negative light. Pakistan makes it to the headlines in the US and the relationship is often described as difficult as both sides complain that they have been betrayed on many issues. Even, during better times; there have been underlying tensions and hiccups that have been a constant burden in the way of building upon any kind of strong and sustainable relationship or long-term

cooperation. Pakistanis and Americans tell conflicting versions of their shared history and have one thing in common, and that is, each side accuses the other of using it to its own advantage.¹ Similarly, differences in perception and interests have been the dividing factor between the two countries.²

The anti-terrorism drive of Pakistan and the Pak-US cooperation in this regards, will keep both the countries engaged and call for a closer collaboration. Both countries have to be in tandem with each other in order to fight terror in the region. A fundamental change in policy is unlikely, as the core issues remain the same and the US cannot likely lose an ally in the region at the given point in time due to its engagement in Afghanistan. While Pakistan has much to worry about when it comes to the growing Indo-US alliance; the prospect of India joining the Nuclear Suppliers Groups (NSG) is likely to lead to further instability. Pakistan has formally applied for membership of the NSG, an exclusive club of nuclear trading nations on May 19, 2016. The formal application seeking membership of 48-nation NSG was submitted by Pakistan's Ambassador in Vienna.³

Similarly, in the case of a reversal of the Iran nuclear deal, the repercussions for Pakistan-Iran relations are likely to be grave, thus impacting bilateral ties between the two countries and affecting the prospective Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline. The advent of Trump presidency is also likely to make visa requirements extensive for Pakistanis wishing to travel to the US. This stems from Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric during his election campaigns.

What makes it difficult to predict Trump presidency is Trump's lack of experience in holding a public office ever before, so the baggage that is likely to come with this presidency is unknown. The Trump presidency is likely to be a tougher one for Pakistan and may experience its highs and lows, in given situations. Therefore, Pakistan must be pro-active in engaging with the new Republican administration and ensure that it is not viewed via a very narrow lens and labelled as a terrorist state.

¹ Daniel Markey, *No Exit from Pakistan* (India: Cambridge, 2013), 2.

² *Ibid.*,3.

³ "Pakistan Applies for Accession to NSG", *Express Tribune*, May 21, 2016.

Background of the Relationship: Post-9/11 Era

As mentioned previously, Pakistan and the US have had a very unstable relationship, which is why both the countries have often been labelled as disenchanted allies.⁴ The post-9/11 period experienced a re-engagement of Washington with Islamabad, after which close collaboration continued. Military and counterterrorism assistance continued and Pakistan began to receive funds under the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) programme as a compensation it for the costs it had endured while fighting terror. Meanwhile, Pakistan also became an important non-NATO ally and a key US partner in the fight against terror.

However, this close cooperation saw many hiccups as the US pressurised Pakistan to do more to fight the militant groups. The Raymond Davis incident in January 2011, followed by the Abbottabad raid in May 2011, to capture Osama Bin Laden, which was followed by the Salala Border Attack in November 2011, lead to an all-time-low in relations between the two countries. Although Pakistan remained a key ally after 9/11, the US continued with its carrot and stick policy alongside continuing to pressurise Pakistan to do more to eliminate terrorism and by restricting funding under the CSF. However, a stable, thriving and democratic Pakistan has always remained vital to the US interests as the country lies at the centre of several top priority areas like regional and global terrorism, an unstable Afghanistan, the threat of nuclear proliferation as well as its role in battling Islamic extremism. Therefore, ties between the two countries have been transactional and driven by the US interests in the region.

Trump's Approach

Since the newly elected US President has never held public office ever before, it has become extremely difficult to judge how his approach will be towards Pakistan. Although Pakistan has not figured clearly on Donald Trump's priority list, however, in his campaign speeches and tweets he has mentioned Pakistan, but mostly in an adverse sense. During an interview with the *CNN* anchor, Anderson Cooper, in 2017, the then-Republican frontrunner Trump termed Pakistan "a vital problem" for the US. "Because

⁴ Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2001).

they have a thing called nuclear weapons,” he said, adding, “they have to get a better hold of the situation.”⁵ Similarly, other statements and tweets from Trump during his election campaign period signify a similar trend. After an attack on a recreational park in Lahore, Trump tweeted, “I alone can solve.”⁶ Similarly, way prior to his elections campaign, his views about Pakistan have not been very positive. This is evident from an *NDTV* interview in which Trump had called for an immediate pull-back on aid to Pakistan unless it did away with its nuclear weapons. “They are not friends of ours. (There are) plenty of other terrorists in Pakistan, we know that” he had said.⁷ Regarding the relationship between India and Pakistan, Trump had once stated that “well, I would love to see Pakistan and India get along because that’s a very, very hot tinderbox.... That would be a very great thing. I hope they can do it.” He added he would be happy to “mediate” between the two neighbours to defuse the situation.⁸

Trump and Pakistan: Prospects

Drawing from the recent news items in the media and statements by the new American President Trump, it seems that Pakistan will figure quite low on the US priority list. Relations are likely to continue, but at an extremely low level, however, any unexpected event in the region may lead to a renewed US interest in Pakistan. Ties between the two countries have predominantly been security centric and underlying issues of the unpaid payments of the CSF remain unresolved presently. The most notable aspect of this new government in the US is that the new President-elect Trump has assumed office without any prior experience. This reinforces the element of uncertainty to how the future course will be determined. However, it may be noted that from previous statements it is abundantly clear that Trump is pro-India and his inclination towards Pakistan’s arch rival is something that Pakistan must be cautious about. Statements from the Trump’s team also signify a negative tilt towards Pakistan as his National Security Adviser, Lt

⁵ “Donald Trump’s Popular Statements about Pakistan, Muslims,” *Pakistan Today*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/11/09/donald-trumps-popular-statements-about-pakistan-muslims/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Yashwant Raj, “Would Love to see India and Pakistan get along: Donald Trump,” *Hindustan Times*, October 16, 2016, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/would-love-to-see-pakistan-and-india-get-along-donald-trump/story-n2DJQzBsLIVxXkTTjBt7DJ.html>

Gen Mike Flynn, was of the view that Pakistan should be punished for its links with radical militancy.⁹ Therefore, Pakistan can only expect and assume what shape this relationship will take in the years to come. As mentioned before, Trump's tilt towards India can be termed as a decisive factor in shaping the new US administration's relationship with Pakistan.

However, recent trends in the Pak-US ties indicate an uneasy relationship due to divergences in the way both countries have viewed counterterrorism efforts and the crackdown against militant groups. In this context, statements in the recent past have shown how President Trump, even before taking over as President has viewed Pakistan's nuclear weapons. This is evident from an interview during his election campaign when he stated that he might seek help from India to address the "problem" of what he described as a "semi-unstable" nuclear-armed Pakistan. He also stated that "the single biggest problem we have is nuclear weapons, you know, countries with them. And it's not only a country you have nine countries right now with nuclear weapons." But Pakistan is semi-unstable. We don't want to see total instability. It's not that much, relatively speaking. We have a little bit of a good relationship. I think I'd try and keep it," said Trump.¹⁰

Even though there is a great amount of ambiguity regarding the new US administration's relationship with Pakistan, it is most likely that a limited commitment to Afghanistan continues and relationship with Pakistan becomes highly conditional, signifying an older pattern, reminiscent of the post-Cold War period and the post-9/11 era. It is important to identify that the Republican victory on November 8, gave them both halves: the Congress as well as the White House. Considering the Senate and the House of Representatives' budget-tinkering powers, there will be noteworthy changes in the distribution of the US overseas military and development aid.

Promotion of human rights and democracy is likely to wither, as is the idea of massive development assistance. A new compromise will

⁹ Akbar Shahid Ahmad, "The Donald Trump Pakistan Saga is Worse Than you Thought," *Huffington Post*, December 1, 2016.

¹⁰ "Donald Trump says may Seek India's Help on 'Unstable' Pakistan Nukes," *Hindu*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/trump-says-may-seek-indias-help-on-unstable-pakistan-nukes/article8531485.ece>

emerge between the different strands of the party in these three bodies, one that will likely mark a sharp swing away from the idea of freely spending money abroad in support of progressive agendas. Human rights and democracy promotion is likely to weaken, as is the idea of massive development assistance. This will lead to a reduction in American influence in Kabul and Islamabad.¹¹

The picture with military aid is far less clear-cut. If anything, the US Congress is going to be even more incredulous than the Trump's White House over the flow of money to Pakistan for counter-terrorism cooperation. The recently announced visa ban by President Trump via an executive order titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States" has created waves around the world and has raised many doubts in the minds of Pakistani Diaspora settled in the US and more so in the minds of those planning to settle there. As for Pakistanis, although they have not – yet – been included on Trump's list of seven countries, he has proposed "extreme vetting" for Pakistani visa applicants. Even though the exact measures that come under the extreme vetting label have not been explained, it is very likely that visa processing for Pakistani citizens, wishing to travel to the US, will take longer than usual.¹²

It may be noted that under Trump, the past US policies of enhancing strategic partnership with India to contain China, pressure on Pakistan to do more in combating terrorists without any exceptions and seeking Pakistan's assistance in encouraging the peace process in Afghanistan will continue. Further, the US will remain focused on ensuring the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and preventing nuclear proliferation. For the last many years, there have been vigorous negotiations in South Asia about the US efforts to mainstream India into the non-proliferation regime and improve nuclear cooperation with the country that famously denounced the regime as discriminatory. This has been viewed by Islamabad as harming Pakistan's strategic interests. Pakistan's policies regarding the nuclear non-proliferation regime will be influenced by the development of India's case

¹¹ Johan Chacko, "What does Donald Trump Mean for the Delicate India-Pakistan Balance of Power?," November 15, 2016, <https://qz.com/837451/what-does-donald-trump-mean-for-the-delicate-india-pakistan-balance-of-power/>

¹² Rafia Zakaria, "What does Trump's Executive Order Mean for Pakistanis?," *News*, January 30, 2017.

for NSG membership, for logical security reasons. The persistent efforts of the US to conduct nuclear trade with India and make it a member of the NSG will reduce Pakistan's space in the nuclear non-proliferation regime and it is highly probable that the doors for Pakistan's nuclear mainstreaming will be closed permanently if India becomes a member of the nuclear non-proliferation regime before Pakistan. However, there is also a case for viewing Pakistan as a prospective member of the NSG on its own merit if the international criteria is developed multilaterally, with the due deliberation of the strategic interests of all parties and the goal of balancing them with the possibility of strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime (NNPR).¹³

It would also continue to encourage Pakistan and India to engage in a bilateral dialogue to resolve their outstanding disputes. It is uncertain, however, that it would be prepared to play any mediatory role in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute in view of India's well-known opposition. In recognition of the importance of a politically stable and economically progressive Pakistan for the regional peace and stability, and as a voice for moderation in the Muslim world, the US will continue to extend limited economic and military assistance to Pakistan. Such assistance will also help maintain the US leverage on Pakistan for the fulfilment of the latter's policy goals vis-à-vis Pakistan and the region. Therefore, Pakistan must try to strengthen friendship with the US while reducing dependence on it.

Things can, however, take a difficult turn in the Pak-US relations if Washington under Trump concludes that Pakistan is not cooperating sincerely in combating terrorists and if Pakistan withholds cooperation in encouraging national reconciliation and a political settlement in Afghanistan. Similarly, issues relating to nuclear safety or proliferation are likely to create problems. These developments may evoke a robust US response under Trump to the detriment of Pakistan.¹⁴ The often repeated question is that whether the coldness in the Pak-US relations is likely to continue? The answer to this question lies in the affirmative as, since the year 2011, Pakistan's importance as the key US ally has lessened following the killing of al-Qaeda chief, Osama Bin Laden, in Abbottabad. One indicator of that is there has been no visit to the US by

¹³ Sobia Paracha, "The Case for Pakistan's Nuclear Supplier Group's Membership," *Diplomat*, November 19, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/the-case-for-pakistans-nuclear-suppliers-group-membership/>

¹⁴ Javid Hussain, "Trump and Pakistan," *Nation*, November 22, 2016.

the former army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, in his second extension (2011-2013) and only one trip by the outgoing military chief General Raheel Shareef in 2015. Since the onset of the CPEC, Beijing has replaced Washington as Islamabad's major strategic, economic and diplomatic partner. The CSF given for counterterrorism cooperation since 9/11, have elapsed in 2016. The future military and economic aid to Pakistan has been slashed and made conditional to certification.¹⁵

Pakistan has continued to provide valuable cooperation in the intelligence gathering related to transnational terrorists like the al-Qaeda and the ISIS involved. By and large, this collaboration is very much needed and should continue. So sanctioning Pakistan is not an option — at least, that is what the US Defence Secretary, General James Mattis, hinted in his remarks during his confirmation hearing. He warned that putting conditions on the US security assistance to Pakistan has not always produced the desired results. So, this approach is also viewed as being counterproductive. However, the carrot and stick policy is evident from General Mattis' statement in which he states that the US would incentivise Pakistan's cooperation. During a confirmation hearing at the Senate Armed Forces Committee, General Mattis underlined the need to stay engaged with Pakistan while asking it to do more to eradicate terrorism from the region. "If confirmed, I will work with the State Department and the Congress to incentivise Pakistan's cooperation on issues critical to our national interests and the region's security, with focus on Pakistan's need to expel or neutralise externally-focused militant groups that operate within its borders," General Mattis told the committee while responding to a question. In his opinion, Pakistan had "learned some hard lessons" from its dealings with the Taliban.¹⁶

Will a continuation of the previous policy of neither carrots nor sticks work? Washington needs to try something new, but it will not be easy to think up good policy. The US engagement with the region has revolved around two organising ideas — China and the war on terrorism, of which the Afghanistan war is a part. For one, Washington needs India, and, for the other, it needs Pakistan. But Pakistan and India do not get

¹⁵ Abdul Basit, "Trump's Victory: Future of US-Pakistan Relations," *RSIS Commentary*, No. 291, November 29, 2016.

¹⁶ Anwar Iqbal, "US to Incentivise Pakistan's Cooperation, says Mattis," *Dawn*, January 14, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1308372>

along, nor do Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is seen as destabilising India and not helping in stabilising Afghanistan. And at the strategic level, Pakistan is seen as part of the Pakistan-China axis. That makes the Pak-US relations very complex.¹⁷

While looking at the positive aspects of the newly sworn in Trump administration, Trump's eagerness to work with Russia is a window of opportunity for Pakistan in this way. Pakistan, Russia and China want to engage the Taliban to defy the ISIS threat. Trump also views ISIS as a greater threat. This convergence of the US, Russia and China's interest can be used as the means for a multilateral agreement to promote peace between the resistance and the collaborators of the West in Afghanistan and to steer the US towards withdrawal of the troops in the wake of a multilateral agreement for a trade regime that accords the US a share.¹⁸

Conclusion

Although it is too early to predict the course of the Pak-US relations under President Trump's Republican administration, which so far is only based on assumptions and predictions at present. However, it may be seen that relations with Pakistan depend on what approach President Trump brings to the War on Terrorism and to the Afghanistan war. The Obama administration went astray in dealing with Pakistan. President Obama got way too involved in India both for reasons of legacy and his focus on building India as a balancer to China. And that gave India a big voice regarding the Pak-US relations to Pakistan's disadvantage. Similarly, President Obama was also in a hurry to leave some semblance of stability in the Afghanistan war as he left office. This haste led him to put too much pressure on Pakistan, which further cornered by the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, as well. So relations with Pakistan came under strain as Pakistan felt squeezed on three sides. For better or worse Pakistan decided it would not give in under pressure. President Obama's pivot to Asia and the need to build up India as a balancer against China had created an imbalance in the US approach to the region.

¹⁷ Touqir Hussain, "Trump vs Pakistan," *Diplomat*, February 3, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/trump-vs-pakistan/>

¹⁸ Zeenia Satti, "Trump, Pakistan and Afghanistan," *Daily Times*, January 26, 2017, <http://dailytimes.com.pk/opinion/26-Jan-17/trump-pakistan-and-afghanistan>

The fact is that the looming strategic shadow of China is not the only challenge that the US faces there. There is, of course, the unresolved conflict in Afghanistan, but also the looming threat of ISIS, continued militancy in Pakistan (both home grown and Afghanistan-based), revolutionary Iran, and an assertive Russia. Pakistan is a factor in all this. The US-Pakistan relationship has served some important interests of the two countries for over six decades and may continue to do so at least for the foreseeable future. Despite frequent breakdowns, the relationship has survived because both sides have felt a compelling need for each other and kept coming back. There can only be a limited amount of pressure that the US can exert on Pakistan as, by the US' own fears, Pakistan is where terrorism and the nuclear threat unite. A major break in the Pak-US relationship will be in favour of China, which is something that the US would not want to happen at any cost. However, the major themes in the Pak-US relationship are the war on terror, nuclear weapons and Pakistan's relationship with its arch rival India. It is most likely that the constant themes in the relationship are likely to remain the hot topics for engagement. In the given circumstances, Pakistan must try to engage with the new Republican presidency under Donald Trump and must not leave any stone unturned to improve relations, just as the US has shown utmost warmth to India in recent times. However, presently the factor of uncertainty is likely to continue as far as relations between the US and Pakistan are concerned.

However, it may be seen that the most likely scenario for the coming years is that the Afghanistan situation is likely to remain a stalemate and the US and Pakistan will not need each other as much as they used to have the previous years. Similarly, the conversation is not likely to be around the US assistance to Pakistan, although it may continue to revolve around issues pertaining to cracking down on terrorist networks. The Af-Pak framework, through which the US has been viewing Pakistan, is likely to continue.¹⁹ In a nut shell, the transactional nature of the relationship is most likely to continue and determine relations between the US and Pakistan.

¹⁹ Dr. Joshua White, Associate Professor Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced Studies, in a meeting at the Institute of Strategic Studies held on May 12, 2017.