

From friend to foe: Post-9/11 Pakistan–US relations; a realist perspective

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Abstract

The relations between Pakistan and the United States, throughout the course of history, have witnessed many ups and downs. At times, when their interests were aligned, strong socio-economic and military cooperation was seen between the two states. Yet, on other occasions they were at odds with and distant from each other. However, post 9/11, Pakistan–US relations were at its zenith, when Pakistan became the frontline ally of the US in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, and the US granted Pakistan the prestigious status of non-NATO ally. Soon after, though, the partnership between the two states was in troubled waters: when the US repeatedly violated Pakistan's sovereignty through drone strikes and covert ops, it diplomatically painted Pakistan as the bad guy by claiming it to be part of the problem (terrorism), not the solution, and by promoting India within the region. Furthermore, when Pakistan became part of China's New Silk Road initiative, commonly known as the Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan–US relations saw its lowest point in history. This article critically analyzes post-9/11 Pakistan–US relations by application of two mainstream theories of international relations in tandem: Realism and (Neo)-structural Realism. Realism explains the US foreign policy rationale, while Structural Realism explains Pakistan's foreign policy choices in relation to the US.

Keywords

Pakistan–US relations, post 9/11, realism, structural realism

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Background

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the country joined the United States (US)-led capitalist bloc in 1949, when Liaquat Ali Khan, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, accepted the US invitation to visit Washington DC. Soon after, Pakistan received much-needed socio-economic aid from the US, approximately US\$3 billion between 1947 and 1965 (Sial, 2007). Furthermore, by joining two US-led defense pacts—the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955—Pakistan received military aid worth approximately US\$650 million between 1953 and 1965 (Sial, 2007). However, later, in 1963, Pakistan–US relations significantly deteriorated, when Pakistan reconciled its border disputes with China. The US expressed its displeasure by deferring the US\$4.3 million loan to Pakistan to construct an airport at Dhakka, then East Pakistan (Kux, 2001). From this point onwards, Pakistan–US relations predominantly deteriorated until the late 1970s, with the exception of Pakistan’s critical role in the US–China rapprochement of the early 1970s, which led to the US recognizing mainland China as China (Lee, 2016).

In 1979, Pakistan–US relations reinvigorated after the Soviet Union (USSR) invaded Afghanistan. The USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan made Pakistan and the US close allies, as their interests converged: the US wanted to contain communism’s expansion in south Asia, whereas Pakistan saw it as an initial step of the USSR’s long desire to reach warm waters. Therefore, to deter the Soviet threat, the US supported Pakistan, both militarily and economically. In 1981, US Congress approved a US\$3.2 billion package, which included provision of 40 F-16 aircrafts (Gwertzman, 1981). Later, a US\$4 billion financial support plan was approved for Pakistan by the Reagan administration, and Pakistan was also exempted from the Symington and Glenn Amendments. Cordial and friendly ties between Pakistan and the US lasted for almost a decade (1979–1989), but as soon as the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan (in 1989), the US exited the region, leaving Pakistan to clean up the mess. Later, in 1998, the Pressler Amendment became effective, resulting in suspension of all military and socio-economic aid to Pakistan, in response to India conducting a nuclear test. Also, the US imposed comprehensive economic and military sanctions on Pakistan (N Malik, 2012).

Introduction

In international relations, the nature of Pakistan–US relations is quite unique. Pakistan is a nuclear-capable Muslim state, a status to which the US is quite averse. Despite this, the US does not let Pakistan escape its sphere of influence, mainly due to Pakistan’s geo-strategic importance. Pakistan and the US have had a relationship for more than 70 years but have not been able to establish a long-term strategic partnership. This is not because Pakistan did not have long-term strategic interests with the US, but because the US never had long-term interests in Pakistan; its interest in Pakistan was mostly mid to short term.

Pakistan–US relations once again regained strength after the devastating 9/11 attacks. Pakistan became the frontline ally of the US in its war against terrorism, and readily accepted all US demands: access to multiple military bases to attack Al-Qaeda and Taliban strongholds, and provision of a stable corridor for the NATO supply line. In return, Pakistan accrued many monetary and military benefits. From 2002 and 2010, the US gave Pakistan approximately US\$19 billion, 10% of which was explicitly for Pakistani development, and as much as 75% of the money was explicitly for military purposes (Zaidi, 2011).

However, history repeated itself, and Pakistan–US relations began to deteriorate in the later part of the first decade of the 21st century, in 2008–2009. The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, commonly known as the Kerry-Lugar Act, was designed to act as a framework for comprehensive and long-term cordial Pakistan–US relations. On the contrary, it acted as a catalyst for tension between the two states, mainly due to the clause that made future US military aid to Pakistan contingent on strict US oversight (Rafique, 2011). Furthermore, the US giving a comprehensive nuclear deal to India (in 2008), while ignoring its longtime trusted ally Pakistan, distanced the two states. Lastly, the continued US demands to Pakistan to do more to curb terrorism, and repeated drone attacks violating Pakistan's sovereignty, led to the start of the parting of ways of the two states.

Events such as the Raymond Davis saga, which pressurized Pakistan to hand over a CIA operative who had killed two Pakistanis in broad daylight; Operation Neptune Spear to assassinate Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda; the Salala checkpoint incident, which caused the casualties of 24 Pakistani army personnel by a NATO helicopter at the Pakistan–Afghan border in Mohmand Agency; and inviting India to the Bonn Conference (in 2011), all greatly contributed to the extreme polarization in Pakistan–US relations. However, the final nail in the coffin when it comes to Pakistan–US relations is considered to have been the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which enabled China to bypass the Malacca Straits, eliminating the US strategic advantage in the region vis-a-vis China.

Initially, the US, under President Trump, tried the traditional way to force Pakistan to give into its demands: promulgating the US Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region, adding Pakistan to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list and threatening it with being added to the blacklist, and persuading the International Monetary Fund (IMF) not to give Pakistan a bailout package on favorable terms. However, in mid-2018, the US realized that reconciling with the Taliban was in its best interests, in order to broker a peace deal, put an end to the Afghan conflict, and exit the country, thereby cutting its losses. The US firmly believed that Pakistan had always had a sway over the Taliban; thus, lately, once again Pakistan–US rapprochement is being witnessed.

Realism

In order to understand the dynamics of the ever-changing Pakistan–US relations, the realist perspective has been adopted to analyze the major events, post 2000, which shaped Pakistan's foreign policy vis-a-vis the US. Both dominant variants of realism—classical realism and structural realism—in tandem have been used to rationalize Pakistan's behavior.

Realism is the oldest and most dominant theory of international relations. Its origins can be tracked back to the writings of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, whereas its modern roots can be traced back to EH Carr's (1939) book *Twenty Year Crisis* and Hans J Morgenthau's (1948) book *Politics Amongst Nations*. Realism is based on the principle that global politics is an intense fight between self-interested countries for power, prestige, and status in an anarchic world (Booth, 2010). Furthermore, states are the preeminent actors in global politics. They are rational actors that seek to maximize their power in order to ensure their survival. As the global system is anarchic, states are forced to shape a strategy (foreign policy) to guarantee not only their survival but also their dominance within the international system (Wivel, 2017). The lust for power is a characteristic that cannot be eradicated within the nature of human beings or states. Lastly, alliances can be made to increase states' capability to defend themselves and promote their agenda,

but the loyalties of allies must not be assumed, and commitments to allies must be terminated if it is no longer in the state's interest to honor them.

In addition, structural realism—a variant of realism—blames not human nature but the international system, as it promotes anarchy and insecurity between states. The systemic pressures of the global system greatly influence the behavior of a state (Lobell, 2010). They rationalize the phenomenon of self-help and maximization of security. Especially in a unipolar world, states more or less have no option but to obey the rules established by the global hegemon—the US in contemporary times. Furthermore, the superpower tactfully uses the prevailing international institutes to further tighten its grip on global affairs and dictate the broad spectrums of socio-economic policies as well as political agendas.

The 9/11 attacks: Reinvigorating Pakistan–US relations

Soon after the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan, not only did the US immediately leave the region, leaving its ally Pakistan to clean up the mess of the decade-long Afghan Jihad (1979–1989), but also the Pressler Amendment was enforced in 1990 (Mahmood, 1994). Also, the US openly criticized the nuclear program of Pakistan and tried to strongarm it to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Consequently, in the last decade of the 20th century, polarized relations between the former allies were observed.

However, in the very beginning of the 21st century, immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the US reached out to Pakistan in an effort to reconcile, as once again it needed Pakistan to safeguard its interests. In order to launch an effective military campaign to avenge the deaths of its citizens and curb the threat posed by terrorists' organizations to the world, Pakistan's assistance was of great importance due to its geo-strategic location, its understanding of Afghanistan, and its ties with the Afghan people. When the US reached out for Pakistan's support, Pakistan haphazardly agreed to do so without putting forward any concrete demands.

When the US demanded Pakistan's support, Pakistan–US relations were at their all-time low. Pakistan was still facing tremendous socio-economic pressure due to the sanctions the US had imposed after the culmination of the Afghan Jihad. Thus, the US was expecting Pakistan to put forward steep demands in exchange for its help in the war. To its surprise, Pakistan readily agreed to become its partner in the war against terrorism. However, in 2003, to oblige Pakistan, the US wrote off its loans worth US\$1 billion, and in 2004 Pakistan was given the prestigious status of a non-NATO ally, allowing it to purchase advanced weapons from the US (Borger, 2004; *Voice of America*, 2009).

The US invasion of Afghanistan is in line with classical realist traditions, which propagate that states must do whatever possible in their power to ensure national security. It was the first time since the start of the unipolar moment in 1991 that US supremacy had been challenged. Thus, it was forced to make an example of the perpetrator and facilitator of the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, to ensure that future attacks be deterred and once again show the world its military might. For this very purpose, the US once again had to make Pakistan its ally due to its unique geo-strategic location of having access to the sea and being Afghanistan's immediate neighbor. Hence, it adopted the 'carrot and stick' approach, again a practice advocated by realism, forcing Pakistan's compliance by openly stating "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists," while also ensuring socio-economic and military benefits for becoming its ally (White House, 2001).

On the other hand, the decision of Pakistan to join the US cause in Afghanistan was in line with neorealist principles, which state that systemic pressure greatly influences the foreign policy

decision of a state. The US, the sole superpower, demanded Pakistan's compliance; Pakistan, an already economically weakened and diplomatically isolated state, after the 1990s sanctions, had no option but to give into the demands put forward by the US.

Drone attacks, the blame game, and 'do more': Increased tensions between Pakistan and the US

Pakistan-US relations were once again in troubled waters when the US started to violate the sovereignty of Pakistan by conducting drone attacks. The first drone attack the US conducted in Pakistan was in South Waziristan on June 19, 2004, which killed Nek Muhammad, a prominent Taliban leader (Mazzetti, 2013). This strike initiated a 12 year-long covert war, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 3700 people, including civilians, via almost 414 drone attacks (Bergen et al., 2018). The most recent drone attack, considered to be the last US drone attack in Pakistan, took place in Balochistan on May 21, 2016, and resulted in the death of Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the then Taliban leader (Entous and Donati, 2016).

The US decision to conduct drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas reflects its realist orientation, as realism advocates that states must safeguard their national interests at all costs, with ensuring the security of their citizens being one of the most important. Thus, to effectively ensure that it would not face another 9/11, the US had to eradicate Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which was only possible by conducting attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas, where militant strongholds existed.

The US was authorized by President Musharraf to conduct drone strikes within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, this authorization was to be kept secret and Pakistan would protest against these attacks as a violation of its sovereignty; this way, the regime could save face from the opposition and masses (Landay, 2013). Pakistan allowing the US to conduct drone attacks within its territory translates how systemic pressure influences the foreign policy formulation of a state.

Not long after the US waged the war against terrorism in Afghanistan (in 2001), it realized that it would not be able to achieve all the objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom, especially the complete eradication of the Taliban. Although the US army was battle hardened, it had never fought in such harsh terrains. Also, if Vietnam taught the US army one thing it was that it is practically impossible to defeat a force using guerrilla warfare tactics. Therefore, in order to avoid humiliation from its public and the international community, the US started to shift the blame for its failure onto Pakistan. Pakistan was blamed for the porous Pakistan-Afghan border which, according to the US, enabled terrorists to carry out devastating operations in Afghanistan and flee to safe havens in Pakistan. In addition, the US blamed Pakistan for not controlling terrorist-facilitators, which helped Al-Qaeda and the Taliban by providing them money, arms, and intelligence. The US conducted this propaganda campaign in order to portray Pakistan as the weak link in the war on terror; to keep its public rallied behind the cause, and more importantly behind US foreign policy; and to depict to the world that the war was lingering on due to Pakistan's ineffectiveness, not the US army's inability, a win-win for the US.

The US repeatedly demanded Pakistan to 'do more' to eradicate terrorism within the region, especially with regards to the Haqqani network, which allegedly operated out of Pakistan and caused havoc in Afghanistan; other terrorist organizations like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP); and alleged extremist outfits such as Sipah-e-Sahaba (SeS) and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT). The US therefore demanded that Pakistan conduct extensive military operations in FATA and Baluchistan,

and especially along the border areas of Afghanistan, and that LeT, SeS, and other alleged militant organizations be banned immediately.

However, this time, Pakistan did not give into the pressure exerted by US to ‘do more’ and to immediately conduct extensive combing operations within its tribal areas against TTP and the Haqqani network. This is because the locals supported the latter groups and so it would disrupt the society, which was against Pakistan’s national interests. Also, at the local level, the masses perceived both of the alleged militant organizations, LeT and SeS, to be organizations promoting Islam and working for their general welfare; thus, they supported them and so immediately banning them would create chaos. Nevertheless, with time, the state gradually formulated an anti-narrative against these organizations and eventually conducted massive military operations against these terrorist outfits and banned both of them.

US–India strategic partnership: Pakistan’s resentment

Historically, US–India relations have been distant. Post independence, when Pakistan clearly joined the US camp during the Cold War, India remained neutral, while having a soft spot for its old friend the USSR. Up till 2000, US–India relations remained estranged. It was US President Bill Clinton’s 2000 visit to India that paved the way for future cordial ties. The proceeding Bush Jr administration laid the foundations of long-term US–India relations, when in 2005 the US and India signed the historic US\$29 billion civil nuclear deal, which finally came into effect in October 2008 after US Congress ratified it (Hosur, 2010). This agreement also paved the way for India to conduct nuclear trade with the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) members, for the first time in three decades.

The US giving a nuclear deal to India, while ignoring its frontline ally in the war against terrorism, Pakistan, seriously strained Pakistan–US relations. A strategic partnership with the US, in the form of a comprehensive civil nuclear deal, is what Pakistan had longed for, but to its dismay the US choose its archrival, India. The US decision to forge a strategic partnership with India is in line with the realist tradition, which clearly states that “a state has no eternal allies, no perpetual friends, only its interests are eternal and perpetual” (Heath, 1969). The US rationale for choosing India was to develop India as a counterweight to a rapidly rising China and to target the population of 300 million Indian middle-class people as a potential market. Deterring China’s rise and developing a huge market for its products (domestic and military) secured the US political agenda in the region and furthered its economic interests.

The Indo–US strategic partnership sent a clear signal to Pakistan that history would most likely repeat itself and the US would soon neglect Pakistan. Thus, it forced Pakistan to start cultivating alternatives in the form of convergence with Russia, a former perceived adversary, strengthening relations with Iran, and further cementing its ties with China. Pakistan’s behavior is in sync with realist teachings that loyalties of allies must not be assumed, if the alliance is no longer serving the interests of a state, the state must withdraw from the alliance and find alternates (Booth, 1991). Therefore, once US loyalties shifted from Pakistan to its arch nemesis India, Pakistan had no option but to forge ties with second-tier powers to counterbalance the threat posed by the Indo–US nexus.

The year 2011: The most catastrophic year for Pakistan–US relations

The year 2011 proved to be the catalyst which greatly accelerated the parting of ways of Pakistan and the US. In all the major events that took place that year—the Raymond Davis saga, the Osama

bin Laden Operation, the Memogate scandal, and the Salala checkpoint incident—the US repeatedly, openly, and bluntly violated Pakistan's sovereignty, with no remorse. This made it clear to Pakistan that long gone were the days when Pakistan-US interests were aligned.

On January 27, 2011, Raymond Davis, an active CIA asset in Pakistan, shot and killed two men in broad daylight in Lahore. Davis justified his act as self-defense, as the two men attempted to rob him at gunpoint. However, in early February, when the trial began, the court barred the release of Davis, in spite of an adamant plea by him and the US that he came under the purview of diplomatic immunity as per international law, a stance reiterated by the then President, Barack Obama (Allbritton, 2011).

The US pressurized Pakistan to comply and release Davis through various tactics: the US Congress threatened Pakistan to quickly resolve the case in a satisfactory manner or the US aid to Pakistan might be curtailed; and the US government deferred the trilateral talks between the US, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which the White House described as a rejoinder to the Davis issue (Brulliard and Sahi, 2011; Kronstadt, 2011). Also, Senator Kerry, the then Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, rushed to Islamabad in an effort deescalate tensions by expressing the deepest sorrows felt by the US at the loss of life, and resolve the Davis issue. Consequently, “*diyat*”—a principle of Islamic law, sanctioned by Pakistani jurisprudence, which allows the family of victims to settle a dispute by pardoning the accused in exchange for money—was the face-saving option opted for to resolve the crisis; US\$2.3 million was given to the families of the victims, and in return Raymond Davis was released and immediately flown back to the US (Rodriguez, 2011). All the steps taken by the US to ensure the safe return of its citizen depict its hegemonic posture, in line with the realist tradition of “the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must” (Allison, 2017).

The classical realist school advocates the idea that states are the supreme sovereign actors and cannot be forced to take actions which are against their national interests (Morgenthau et al., 2005). However, in the Raymond Davis case, state law was cleverly manipulated to set free a criminal who had openly killed two people, in clear contradiction to a nation's interest to ensure that all are equal before law and that justice is served. This case depicts how systemic pressure—US pressure—compelled a state—Pakistan—to give into its demands.

On May 1, 2011, Osama bin Laden, then the world's most wanted man as the founder and leader of Al-Qaeda, the organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks, was killed in Operation Neptune Spear conducted by the US Special Forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan. This US operation grossly violated Pakistan's sovereignty. Unlike the US drone attacks, which Pakistani authorities were aware of, this mission was conducted without taking Pakistan into confidence; thus, great anger was explicitly expressed by the Pakistani administration.

The US justified its covert operation by raising serious suspicions about Pakistani involvement in hiding bin Laden: how else was it possible that bin Laden was residing a few minutes away from the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA), and about 60 miles away from the capital, Islamabad (Homans et al., 2011)? Even John Brennan, Obama's Counterterrorism Advisor, reiterated the US suspicions, saying that it was “inconceivable that Osama bin Laden did not have a support system” in Pakistan (White House, 2011).

If the US had conducted such an operation against any other country, let alone a nuclear country, that country would have immediately cut off its diplomatic ties, expelling the ambassador, while logging a formal complaint with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), along with other measures. However, Pakistan did no such thing; it merely threatened to cut off the NATO supply line and condemned the US operation. Pakistan's behavior, not retaliating at all at the gross

violation of its sovereignty, can be understood by structural realism. After 9/11, the whole world was hunting bin Laden and he was found in Pakistan, near one of its important military institutes. This portrays a picture of Pakistan being complicit in providing a safe haven to bin Laden. Thus, the viable option for Pakistan was to condemn the breach of its sovereignty and somehow sustain its position as a state which is fighting the war against terrorism, not harboring terrorists. Simply, the systemic pressure was overwhelming, which forced Pakistan to not take any concrete actions.

In the early hours of November 26, 2012, the US-led NATO forces attacked two Pakistani checkpoints, Volcano and Boulder, located in the Salala area near the Pakistan–Afghan border, in Mohmand Agency. Twenty-four Pakistani soldiers were killed and 13 were seriously injured, all of whom were guarding the important crossing point (AR Malik, 2012). Consequently, Pakistan immediately closed the NATO supply line to Afghanistan, sending a strong signal to the US that its act was completely unacceptable.

Pakistan had to offensively retaliate to the US-led operation, as it had caused casualties of its military personnel, one of the state's most important institutions which guarantees its survival. Not reacting would have given the world the idea that Pakistan was not a US ally but a slave, and that its sovereignty could be violated by others too. Pakistan's action falls within the dictates of realism, which advocates that the utmost priority of a state is to ensure its territorial integrity.

US and Afghan officials claimed that while the US-led forces were conducting an operation against the Taliban near the Pakistan–Afghan border, they were fired upon from the Pakistani border, and that therefore their attack was purely retaliatory. However, neither Pakistan's civil nor military leadership believed this explanation. The all-important NATO supply line remained closed for more than seven months, until the US officially apologized for the incident (*Guardian*, 2012).

In a nutshell, the year 2011 made Pakistan realize that it was paying a very steep price to maintain relations with the US. It was high time that Pakistan geo-strategically and geo-politically reoriented itself in order to ensure that its supreme national interests of territorial integrity and political independence were safeguarded. Thus, post 2011, in a bid to counterbalance the deterioration in US relations, Pakistan started to develop ties with Russia, previously considered an adversary, and to strengthen relations with China, the second largest economy of the world, and with regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and other Middle Eastern oil-rich states.

The reactions of CPEC and the US: Pakistan and the US part ways

On April 20, 2015, the highly anticipated China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—finally materialized, as 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) amounting more than US\$46.5 billion were signed between Pakistan and China (Khan and Khan, 2019). CPEC provided the much-needed economic stimulus Pakistan's economy direly needed, gave it the support of a veto power, China, and greatly increased its geo-strategic importance, as CPEC would transform Pakistan into a transit corridor for more than 64 countries (Esteban, 2016). China finally overcame the US strategic advantage in the region, as through CPEC, specifically Gwadar port, the infamous 'Malacca dilemma' no longer existed. A win-win situation; thus, the perfect partnership.

In February 2014, when the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, launched the historical US\$4 trillion BRI, it showcased to the world China's ambition to launch itself as the next superpower (*Economist*, 2016). This was bad news for the US, who, since 1991, had been enjoying the status of sole superpower of the world. Thus, it decided to use its strategic advantage in the region to ensure the

failure of the BRI. It induced a regime change in Myanmar, and Aung Sun Suki came to power. The first thing Sun Suki did was to immediately terminate the critical China–Myanmar Corridor of the BRI, which to an extent diminished the all-important Malacca dilemma (Decker, 2020). Soon after, China turned to its iron brother, Pakistan, and initiated CPEC. Once again, in order to ensure that the Malacca dilemma remained effective, the US turned to its fair-weather ally, Pakistan, to ensure that CPEC did not materialize. However, to its surprise, for the first time, Pakistan did not give into US demands; consequently, Pakistan and the US parted ways.

With time, the resentment that Pakistan had built up towards the US due to events such as the Indo–US Strategic Partnership, the Raymond Davis episode, the Osama bin Laden operation, and the Salala checkpoint incident materialized in the form of its geo-political reorientation from the US towards China. One major factor that forced it to realign its interests was the US–India convergence that had been evident over the past half decade. While joining the war against terrorism, the only thing that Pakistan demanded in return for its total support was that India would not be given any role in Afghanistan in particular, and in the region in general (Shah, 2007). However, the US did not keep its part of the bargain; post 2009, a clear paradigmatic shift was witnessed with regards to Asia, where India's role was significantly promoted and Pakistan was being criticized. Thus, when the opportunity presented itself, Pakistan readily seized it, foregoing its old ally, the US.

Pakistan's decision is in line with the classical realist paradigm. The systemic pressure continuously being mounted by the US to comply with its increasingly unreasonable demands could only be deterred if Pakistan formed a strategic partnership of its own with a power that could possibly compete with the US; thus, China. Also, the perception of Pakistani leaders drastically changed after 2011's subsequent events; now they had anger and contempt towards the US for repeatedly bluntly violating Pakistan's sovereignty. On the other hand, China was always perceived as a friendly and trusted neighboring state by the Pakistani elite. Thus, when China presented itself as an alternative to the US, the state leaders readily accepted it. Lastly, the socio-economic conditions of Pakistan were in a tough spot after the US distanced itself from Pakistan, post 2009. At the very same time, the globe recognized China as the potential economic hegemon, especially after 2008's economic crisis; thus, by becoming China's strategic partner, Pakistan ensured its much-needed economic help.

Cutting the CSF, the FATF grey list, and IMF conditional loans: The US forcing Pakistan's compliance

Soon after taking office, President Trump made it clear to Pakistan that the US would use the 'stick' in order to make Pakistan compliant, as, in the President's view, for decades Pakistan had been taking unfair advantage of US generosity. His tweet in this regard explains it all:

The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more! (Shepardson, 2018)

Soon after, to tighten Pakistan's screws, the Trump administration suspended US\$900 million of aid to Pakistan under the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) (Mohammed and Landay, 2018). Furthermore, restrictions on the movement of Pakistani diplomats were also imposed by the US (Janjua and Harris, 2018). In addition, it ended its military and education programs with Pakistan

(Ali and Stewart, 2018). However, due to Pakistan's geo-strategic importance, after almost eight months, in September 2018, the US slashed US\$300 million from the CSF as a punishment to Pakistan, while releasing the rest of the amount (Stewart and Ali, 2018).

A carrot and stick approach has remained part and parcel of the US approach to managing relations with Pakistan over the years. It has either provided Pakistan with socio-economic and military aid, the carrot, to ensure its compliance in safeguarding US interests in the region, or has imposed stringent sanctions, the stick, to force its obedience. This carrot and stick approach is precisely what the realist paradigm propagates that a state should do, i.e. use whatever means necessary to fulfil its national interests and further its agenda.

On June 28, 2018, Pakistan was further pressured to give into US demands by having its name put on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog against financing terrorism and money laundering. This was not the first time Pakistan was put on one of the FATF's lists; the state was also there in 2008 and from 2012 to 2015. The FATF stated that Pakistan's name was included on the grey list due to its structural deficiencies in Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) and Anti-Money Laundering (AML).

There are no hard and fast parameters set by the FATF to assess whether to put a country on the grey list or not; a set of 40 recommendations by the FATF regarding AML and CFT have become the international standards. However, the FATF's assessment can sometimes be biased. For instance, the Basel Anti-Money Laundering Index of 2017 ranks Pakistan at 46 out of 146 countries, better than Tajikistan (4), Mali (7), Kenya (11), Sierra Leone (26), and Panama (30), none of which are on the FATF's list.

The FATF placing Pakistan on its grey list cannot be considered in seclusion but must be placed within the broader picture of deteriorated Pakistan-US relations. It is more political in nature than financial. The US used its clout over the FATF, being its biggest financier and the current FATF President being a former Assistant Secretary of the US Treasury Department, to pressurize Pakistan to comply with its demands, especially distancing itself from China, sabotaging CPEC, and regaining strategic advantage in the region. The US influencing a global institute, the FATF, to force Pakistan's compliance to safeguard its interests within the region is explicitly what structural realism advocates; the system is manipulated by great powers to ensure that their interests are met.

In 2018, the newly elected government of Pakistan faced a severe balance-of-payment crisis of approximately US\$12.4 billion (Runde and Olson, 2018). To avoid bankruptcy, Pakistan started a rigorous campaign to obtain the money needed from its friends/allies, without needing to go to the IMF, as that was against the electoral campaign of the elected regime. In this regard, Pakistan got US\$6 billion from Saudi Arabia, US\$3 billion was parked in Pakistan's accounts, while US\$3 billion of oil was given to Pakistan on a one-year deferred payment (*Economic Times*, 2018). This was still not enough to prevent the balance-of-payment crisis. Thus, Pakistan reached out to its all-weather trusted ally, China, for its help regarding the balance-of-payment crisis, but to its surprise China refused (Aamir, 2019). Later, US\$3 billion was given by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Pakistan to resolve its economic crunch (Rizvi, 2018). However, still Pakistan did not have enough to effectively avert the balance-of-payment crisis.

Pakistan's economic conditions forced it to go to the IMF for a bailout package. However, this time around, the IMF imposed stringent conditions, at the behest of the US. The Trump administration made it evident to Pakistan that in order to secure a bailout package from the IMF, which is under US de-facto control, it would have to ensure its compliance to the US regional cause, and curb China's rise by minimizing its influence over Pakistan. In this regard, Secretary Pompeo's statement demanding that the IMF to reject Pakistan's bailout request as there was no need for

American taxpayers to repay Beijing's loans depicts the US control over IMF decision-making (Brunnstrom et al., 2018). Once again, the US successfully manipulated the system to force Pakistan to give into its demands, as structural realism dictates.

Persistent precarious human rights conditions in Pakistan: A thorn in Pakistan–US relations

The US has always considered itself as the champion of human rights. Since its independence, it has propagated ideologies such as the “white man's burden,” stressing that it was the responsibility of Americans to make the world civilized—a better place for the people to live in. Furthermore, after cementing its dominance in geopolitics after the Second World War, the cornerstone of the US-designed and -promulgated liberal world order was to ensure provision of fundamental human rights to each and every individual across the globe. Moreover, time and again, the US has been seen sympathizing with and supporting humanitarian causes throughout the world; in the last two decades alone, it has provided more than US\$70 billion for human rights assistance (Ingram, 2019).

As the US considers the issue of human rights very close to its heart, it remains a determining factor in the nature of its relations with states. Pakistan–US relations have been affected by the state of human rights in Pakistan. Post 9/11, Pakistan–US relations were at its zenith, and US economic assistance to Pakistan witnessed a mammoth increase of 2273%, as it jumped from an insignificant US\$3.376 million in 2000 to a staggering US\$4.462 billion in 2010 (Epstein and Kronstadt, 2011). However, after 2009's US State Department report, which claimed that the Pakistani regime deliberately curtailed many fundamental human rights like freedom of religion, association, and movement (Kronstadt, 2009), the US administration threatened to cut aid to Pakistan to force it to ameliorate its human rights conditions (Walsh and Pidd, 2010).

Religious freedom and minority rights—fundamental determinants of human rights—remain the US's major concerns in Pakistan. The laws prohibiting blasphemy—sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's Penal Code—are discriminatory and arbitrary in their use, and are often abused to settle personal vendettas, as they require little evidence (Kronstadt, 2011). The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its 2019 report states that around 80 individuals remain imprisoned for alleged blasphemy, with at least half facing a life sentence or death (Dorjee et al., 2019). Moreover, the blasphemy law has created a culture of impunity for violent attacks after mere allegations. For instance, over perceived anti-Islamic remarks, a student murdered Professor Khalid Hameed (Imran, 2019). More importantly, in Pakistan, the faith of Ahmadi Muslims is virtually criminalized. Not only do they face severe persecution from the authorities, but they are also harassed by the society. For instance, in October 2019, in the Punjab, Pakistan, the police partly demolished a 70-year-old Ahmadiyya mosque (*Voice of America*, 2019).

Over the years, human rights conditions in Pakistan have remained a grave concern of the international community in general, and of the US in particular. However, the US has never adopted a consistent policy or strategy to compel states, especially Pakistan, to ensure fundamental human rights to their citizens. It has always implemented policies keeping in mind its national interest at that particular time, not the greater good—a realist practice. For instance, Pakistan–US relations were at their zenith during 1979–1989 and 2001–2008, during which time military dictators were in power in Pakistan and they deliberately curtailed many fundamental human rights to strengthen their rule.

Commencement of US–Taliban negotiations: Pakistan–US convergence?

After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration declared a war on terror and invaded Afghanistan, without any clear strategy. The absence of a clear vision in Afghanistan later haunted the US, as it turned into the longest war in the history of the US. Soon after Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, the Taliban reached out to the US in order to negotiate and put an end to the invasion, but President Bush refused to do so, stating, “they must have not heard. There’s no negotiations” (Harris, 2001). This view was also transferred to his successor President Obama.

However, President Obama soon realized that it was time to start a dialogue with the Taliban. Thus, the infamous ‘Kill and Talk’ policy was propagated by the Obama administration; dividing Taliban into two factions, Good Taliban and Bad Taliban, negotiating with the Good Taliban while hunting the Bad Taliban (Rubin, 2020). However, this strategy did not make any headway, as the leaders of the Taliban saw this as a weakness of the US, especially after it haphazardly withdrew its forces from Iraq.

Pakistan played a critical role in setting up the US–Taliban negotiations in 2011. Even though no agreement was reached between the two as a result of these talks, it was still a historic moment as the two sides negotiated with each other for the first time post 9/11, which implied de-facto recognition of the Taliban from the US, as an important actor to bring peace in Afghanistan. Also, Pakistan’s position was strengthened over the Afghan peace process and the often-repeated rhetoric that the road to peace to Kabul goes through Islamabad.

With the help of Pakistan, the Taliban opened an office in Doha, Qatar in 2012, which later proved to be instrumental in the peace process. The peace process, which began in 2011 with the US initiating a direct dialogue with the Taliban, lingered on for more than seven years, with no substantial development. However, in September 2018, President Trump appointed Zalmay Khalidzad as a Special Adviser on Afghanistan tasked to find an amicable solution to the Afghan conflict. Khalidzad, with the help of Pakistan, in the span of 17 months and six successive rounds of peace talks, successfully brokered a deal with the Taliban, which was inked on February 29, 2020 (Maizland, 2020).

The US learnt the hard way, by continuously fighting an unwinnable war in Afghanistan for almost two decades, that the only way to ensure peace in Afghanistan, allowing it to withdraw its troops, was through dialogue with the Taliban—Pakistan’s stance all along. Thus, in late 2018, the US started rapprochement with Pakistan, as it knew Pakistan would greatly facilitate the Afghan peace process. The US President Trump wrote a letter to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, in December 2018, asking Pakistan to facilitate the process (*Al-Jazeera*, 2018). The US policy of rapprochement with Pakistan to safeguard its interests is clearly in line with the realist tradition, which advocates that the national interest of a state has to be safeguarded at any cost, even if it means mending ways with an estranged ally.

The current deal between the US and the Taliban could not have materialized without the help of Pakistan. The role of Pakistan in the peace process was greatly appreciated by both Washington and the Taliban. Pakistan more than happily threw its weight behind the peace process, as for years it had advocated that the only way to resolve the conflict was through dialogue, and it was asked to play an important facilitating role, a win-win. Due to this convergence of interests, Pakistan and the US are enjoying friendly relations at least for the time being.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, over the years, Pakistan–US relations can be best described as a ‘marriage of convenience.’ Many ups and downs have been witnessed between the Pakistan–US ties; however, the relations have always been driven by US interests in the region vis-a-vis the role of Pakistan in safeguarding them. Throughout the Cold War, Pakistan was used as a US proxy to further its interests in the region; Pakistan did reap much-needed economic and military benefits, but at a great cost.

Post 9/11, once again the US developed Pakistan as an asset in the region, though this time it had skin in the game, by physically being present in Afghanistan. However, without Pakistan’s assistance, an effective military campaign in Afghanistan was not possible, especially due to the fact that the supply line passed through Pakistan. Thus, the US made sure to keep Pakistan in its sphere of influence; it was given the prestigious status of a non-NATO ally, and millions of dollars’ worth military assistance and economic aid.

However, over time, relations between the two states began to deteriorate. It all began when the US started to repeatedly violate Pakistan’s sovereignty by conducting drone attacks. Unrealistic demands of do more further caused turmoil between the two states. Later, events like the Indo–US nuclear deal, the assassination of Osama bin Laden, and the Salala checkpoint incident started the inevitable parting of ways of the two states, which materialized after CPEC was concluded between Pakistan and China.

Nevertheless, Pakistan–US estrangement did not continue for long, as the US was still fighting the unwinnable war in Afghanistan and needed a face-saving exit, and Pakistan’s role in brokering peace was of utmost importance. Thus, through systemic pressures—slashing CSF, placing Pakistan on the FATF’s grey list, pressuring the IMF to give strictly conditioned loans, and giving socio-economic incentives—the US ensured Pakistan’s compliance. Resultantly, soon after, through Pakistan–US joint efforts, a peace agreement was concluded between the US and the Taliban.

To conclude, the above events clearly illustrate that Pakistan–US relations can be easily explained under the lens of realism; US behavior is in line with classical realist traditions, which advocate that the state is the pre-eminent actor and ought to exercise every resource at its disposal to ensure its national interests are safeguarded. Also, states may forge alliances to serve their interests, though as soon as allies have served their purpose, alliances must be foregone. Pakistan’s foreign policy prescriptions, however, broadly follow neorealism or structural realism, which argue that the pressure exerted by the system overwhelms the effects of the foreign policy formulation of a state.

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