



Deepening Indo-US Strategic Partnership and Pakistan's Concerns

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About the Author

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Strategic partnership between India and the United States continues to gain in depth since the two countries enunciated it in 2006 with the signing of the landmark bilateral nuclear treaty and describing themselves as “natural allies”. The Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement (LEMOA) announced last month and the earlier US Secretary of State, John Kerry’s announcement of three-way talks involving Afghanistan are the latest developments in this partnership which is likely to remain a constant in regional and global politics for the foreseeable future. LEMOA is described as a set of foundational agreements defining defense cooperation to allow use of military facilities, exchange of security related information, joint military exercises etc. Given regional rivalries and conflicts, Pakistan and China can only view the growing security dimension of the partnership with concern. Nonetheless, to assess its impact and reach, this partnership needs to be placed in the contemporary globalized context which is often issue specific as compared to the straight-jacket antagonistic alliances of the Cold War. Important question from a Pakistani perspective is whether this partnership excludes a decent normal relationship with Pakistan, the erstwhile ally of the United States.

American intelligentsia, academia and many in political circles always entertained a fascination for India as a major success story of democratic polity in the developing world. This positive disposition was evident during India’s border skirmishes with China in 1962. Over the years, mutual goodwill increased as the Indian Diaspora in the US grew stronger and Indian economic and technological capacity expanded. The Nehruvian emphasis on non-alignment and the left wing influence in Indian politics had injected a reserve in state-to-state relations until in the early 1990s India started veering away from that creed which is now completely abandoned by the present government under Prime Minister Modi. There was a precedent: China under Deng Xiaoping blazed a new trail with the slogan of “Opening to the West (read the United States)” and “Four Modernizations” to set China’s

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march towards prosperity and great power status. India has had all the assets to forge a natural alliance and partnership with the United States in the new post-Cold War era. Rise of China and fears it evokes among conservative circles in the West further reinforces the trend.

Indo-US Strategic Partnership in the Current Global Environment

In quality and character the post-Cold War alliances and partnerships are malleable and reflect the complexities of the multi-polar and phenomenally interactive world in many dimensions of which security is one albeit important facet. For example, the US and China are widely seen as potential rivals with significant conflict of interest in political, security and economic arena. Yet, China is the largest trading partner of the United States with over 1.5 trillion dollars investment in US treasury bonds alone and the largest number of overseas students in American institutions for higher learning, especially in technological fields. Similarly, many American strategists may view India to be a counterpoise to China, overlooking the fact that the two countries transact over one hundred billion dollars in trade. Then there are other major league players on the world stage, including Russia, who are part of the new complex matrix of global relations. The post-Cold War partnerships thus do not per se crystallize into military confrontation.

Quintessentially, major powers remain in a phase of competition and cooperation. Besides, there are a range of vital global issues, such as climate change, that are assuming urgency under popular pressure and demand great power cooperation than confrontation. Regardless of these overarching considerations, the Indo-US strategic partnership will exert influence and shape developments particularly in the Indian Ocean and the larger Asian region.

Today, points of conflict around the world often relate to what is described as failing states and societies caused by breakdown in governance, underdevelopment or political and economic inequities. Such domestic conditions attract foreign intervention which ends up in further aggravation. Somalia, Afghanistan, former Yugoslavia, Syria, Libya and Yemen are glaring examples. Misfortunes of Iraq began with Saddam's fatal misadventures first against Iran and then Kuwait. Yugoslavia splintered while the heartland of the Middle East is torn by ethnic, sectarian, tribal and sub-regional conflicts. All suffered outside intervention none of which has been the result of a direct great power rivalry or military clash. Current tensions in interstate relations also relate to political and territorial disputes, economic rivalries and the recent and somewhat ubiquitous concerns over terrorism and extremism which every developed country including all major powers view as disruptive and insidious. Here, Pakistan faces the most difficult

challenges as a society and state and in its foreign relations. Against this background, growing Indo-US security cooperation which is the intent of LEMOA will look ominous and worsen regional security balance from Pakistan's point of view.

President Obama's description of Pakistan as an "abysmally dysfunctional state", is obviously erroneous and overdrawn, however, there can be no denial that Pakistan has been sucked into cross currents that are dangerous and destabilizing. To overcome the challenges demands introspection, pragmatism, a better understanding of correlations of global forces, trends and interests, and importantly an astute civilian and military leadership who are on the same page in their grasp and policy response.

Perspectives on Pakistan's Difficult Predicament

The sting in the Indo-US strategic partnership will be provided by the bitterness in Pakistan-US relations. Periods of close relations between Pakistan and the United States related to the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the post-9/11 'War on Terror.' All had a narrow security orientation and mutual cooperation served their respective but somewhat divergent interests. The US walked away once the need for Cold War military bases diminished by the late 1960s and when following a decade of military intervention the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. In the current scenario, Pakistan still retains importance for the role it can play for political stabilization of Afghanistan and in combating terrorism and extremism in the region, the twin objectives that continue to frustrate the United States. American political analysts and policy circles increasingly blame Pakistan for the failure.

The short-lived gestures by President Ashraf Ghani towards Pakistan and the equally ephemeral quadripartite reconciliation effort have given way to vitriolic from Washington and Kabul as Taliban militancy intensified inside Afghanistan. Both capitals now believe that sanctuaries in Pakistan sustain Taliban insurgency. In addition to the Kabul government, the Afghan expat community and intellectuals in the West, particularly in the US, are the most vociferous advocates of this view and accuse Pakistan of abetting extremist elements and instability in Afghanistan. They have consistently propagated this view and negatively influenced American public and official opinion. Protection allegedly provided to the Haqqani network has come to symbolize Pakistan's perfidious behavior. Perception counts and there is little receptivity for arguments that much of the Afghan turmoil owes to the early policy errors by the US led Coalition such as lumping the Taliban together with Al Qaeda on the eve of the Bonn process, letting ethnic non-Pushtun security forces take control of Kabul, failing to revive Afghan economy and above all invading Iraq that removed Coalition focus from Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, we need to rethink why since the 1980s Pakistan has always ended up siding with the most regressive elements in Afghanistan. History bears witness that at every critical juncture the hard-line Mujahedin and the Taliban leadership spurned our advice. Can we expect a changed mindset now? We do not even claim to have direct contacts with the successor Taliban leadership. Our empathy and support for Taliban leaders has turned into a veritable journey on a river of darkness with no happy denouement in sight. We also allowed our policy to fall into Afghanistan's consumptive ethnic divide. We need to disavow pretention of influence with

Taliban leadership and shed any notion that they are an asset. We should unambiguously welcome Taliban leaders reaching out by themselves to Kabul and take credible measures to deny use of our territory for operations inside Afghanistan, including management and fencing/mining of the border. Tolerance for such Taliban activity has not helped peace in Afghanistan. Discouraging it may well do so. There is no gain saying that stability in Afghanistan will allow Pakistan's natural advantages of demographic overlap and affinities of culture and history to come into full play and prove to be a shield against India or any other outsider using Kabul to hurt Pakistan. Also improved security conditions may well inject a balance in relations with the United States.

There is nothing new or surprising in RAW aided subversion inside Pakistan independently or in collusion with other agencies such as the Afghan NDS. However, Prime Minister Modi's recent implicit admission and veiled threat of interference in Pakistan carry a new twist and apparently owe to either his aggressive temperament or an assumption that Pakistan is widely seen as a breeding ground of extremism and terrorism and hence a legitimate target for retaliation. Given Modi's woes in Kashmir, India is expected to do all it can to malign and blame Pakistan for the current indigenous protest and uprising in Kashmir. Already, the Modi government insists on terrorism to be the focus of dialogue with Pakistan and demands closure of cases against those accused of Mumbai and Pathan Kot terrorist incidents. On terrorism, India finds resonance for its views especially in the West.

Despite Zarb e Azb and Pakistan's enormous sacrifices in combating terrorism an impression persists that Pakistan is selective and only targets anti-Pakistan terrorist elements while sparing groups like the Haqqani network or the banned Lashkar e Toiba and Jaish e Muhammad. Pakistan faces a dilemma. It cannot be seen to be placating India when Kashmiris are up in arms against the Indian rule and are being subjected to extreme violence and repression by the Indian security forces. On the other hand, its reputation as a breeding ground of extremism and its apparent diffidence to prosecute perpetrators of terrorist violence in India or Afghanistan has undermined Pakistan's ability to effectively advocate the Kashmiri cause internationally. This predicament hurts the Kashmir cause which in any event must now be primarily carried forward by the Kashmiris and the Kashmiri Diaspora. Depending on the how the situation develops, there could be a renewed opportunity for dialogue and pursuit of a solution based on optimum self governance, respect for fundamental rights and benefit for the Kashmiri people.

Another specific point of friction with the United States is Pakistan's nuclear program, in particular the recent Chinese effort at the behest of Pakistan to block India's admission into the Nuclear Suppliers' Group unless both countries are accepted as members. This may prove to be a temporary issue. The fact is that the United States and the world have grudgingly acquiesced in Pakistan's nuclear status. Nuclear deterrence is central to Pakistan's security and it faces no imminent threat. However, Pakistan will do well by taking a leaf from China's book and act with prudence by keeping an understated posture while ensuring a credible but responsible nuclear deterrence. On security issues, Pakistan must maintain close consultations with China. As for the United States, regardless of irritants and differences, Pakistan must continue to work for a constructive relationship, not dependent on aid, but based on common interest in regional peace and development.

In the longer term, India's expanding economic and military prowess bolstered by Indo-US strategic partnership will subject Pakistan to new pressures. Regional rivalries involving China may sharpen in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions. In that scenario, geo-economics will as much shape future developments as the traditional imperatives of geo-politics. Pakistan will not be short of options as it has strong relations in the Gulf region and with China. Its cooperation with several other regional players, such as Russia, Turkey and Iran, is on the increase. China, of course, holds the most important promise with Pakistan's access to its technology and its vast surplus capital for investment exemplified by the 2003 agreement for long term peaceful nuclear cooperation and the recent Chinese commitment of over 46 billion dollars for China Pakistan Economic Corridor project which is part of the mega "One Road One Belt" project aimed at integrating China with Euro-Asian economy. To participate and benefit from such future opportunities, the major challenge for Pakistan is internal.