

COMMENT 207 - Pakistan's vision to reset its ties with the U.S. and the implications for the Afghan peace negotiations

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Pakistan is in the process of realigning its foreign policy parameters. Since last year, it became clear that Islamabad is trying to achieve [more independence from Saudi Arabia](#) in order to enlarge the room for collaboration with Iran.¹ Currently, in a second major move to change the paradigm in its foreign affairs, Pakistan is envisaging a fundamental reset of its relations with the U.S. Islamabad now expresses its interests in an engaged cooperation with Washington. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi is convinced that there is (still) a 'convergence of interests'² between his country and the U.S. However, Pakistan does not want to be seen anymore solely through the 'Afghan lens'³. Islamabad wishes Afghanistan to cease "exclusively" determining the framework of future collaboration between Islamabad and Washington. Instead, the Pakistani leadership aims to focus on economics, trade, and other investments, particularly within the larger framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019).

Besides the Afghan issue, Islamabad also wills the U.S. to 'de-couple' Pakistan-China relations from Pakistan-U.S. ties. [Qureshi stated](#) that the U.S. should not see

¹ This has repercussions for Afghanistan as well, for example through finding a common ground regarding the issue of the establishment of an [interim government](#) – one of Pakistan's most immediate goals in its current Afghan policy.

² Qureshi [stated](#) in an interview with Al Jazeera: 'Our approach, thinking, objectives and shared visions are very much in line with the priorities of the new administration. And that convergence can be built further.'

³ Special Advisor to the Prime Minister (SAPM) Moeed W. Yusuf [pointed out](#): 'Pakistan was unfortunately seen through the Afghan prism.'

ties between Islamabad and Beijing as ‘a zero-sum game’. In an interview with Al Jazeera, Prime Minister Imran Khan [pointed out](#): ‘why does it have to be an "either, or" formula?’; ‘why does Pakistan have to be in any camp?’ Further: ‘Every country looks to its own interests. Why can't we have good relations with everyone?’ Moreover, Pakistan offered to serve as a mediator between the US and China (creating some kind of a déjà vu moment relating to 1972⁴). Nevertheless, despite the attempts to follow a “dual-track approach”, the [PM made](#) his country’s preference clear: ‘Our relationship with China is better than ever before. For us, the way we look at it is...our future, economic future is now linked with China.’

This envisaged reset of relations with the U.S. raises questions regarding implications for Pakistan’s approach towards Afghanistan – and regarding what the U.S. can expect from Islamabad in terms of the Afghan peace negotiations (APN). During the last months it has become obvious that Islamabad considers a redefinition of its role in the APN – which could have an impact on the nature of Pakistan’s overall support for U.S. peace efforts in Afghanistan. Islamabad perhaps sees its main function (vis-à-vis the U.S./NATO) in Afghanistan as accomplished⁵: it facilitated peace talks between the Taliban and the U.S., resulting in the signing of a [peace agreement](#) in February 2020. Additionally, [Pakistan played a key role](#) in bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table with the Afghan government, launching the Afghan Peace Negotiations (APN/Doha process). In other words, the Pakistani leadership is of the opinion that it did the ‘[maximum](#)’ it could do for the Doha process. From now on Islamabad does not want to be attached to ‘[unrealistic expectations](#)’. Instead, the U.S. needs to [talk directly](#) with the Taliban regarding issues of compliance with the February 2020 deal. Pakistan’s contributions to these

⁴ Pakistan-US relations have been characterized by both close alliance and estrangement. During the Cold War Islamabad played a critical role in U.S. containment of communist Soviet Union, the opening of China in the

1970s and the campaign against Soviet presence in Afghanistan. At that time, the U.S. administration under President Richard Nixon wanted to reach out to China. However, Nixon faced a major problem regarding his new tilt towards Beijing. Despite the fact that China under Mao Zedong was also ready to open up to Washington -because it was confronted with Soviet forces amassing at its borders, ostensibly in preparation for an invasion of the country - the US had no direct access to the Chinese leadership at that time. This brought Pakistan into the picture. With the help of the government in Islamabad and the strong support of the military top brass a secret liaison between Washington and Beijing was facilitated, culminating in Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 (Mittra, Wolf, & Schoettli, 2006, p. 298).

⁵ FM Qureshi [stated that](#): ‘Pakistan has done a lot, we have really bent over backwards to create an environment to facilitate the peace process.’

processes were internationally recognized and the country received much credit for it.⁶ Islamabad thus achieved some major, immediate foreign policy goals (breaking out of diplomatic isolation; achieving international reputation and improvement of regional standing, achieving leverage within Afghanistan) through its engagement in the APN. Pakistan's subsequent engagement in the APN will likely reveal less determination [than before](#) when it comes to convincing the Taliban to comply with the 2020 agreement with the US and negotiate earnestly with the Afghan government. In other words, Pakistan does not feel further obliged (at least not with the previous dedication) to support the APN, especially not as a basis for future PAK-US relations – as was expected from former administrations in Washington.

Furthermore, Pakistan's armed forces and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) will probably proceed with their military assistance to insurgents and various terror groups in Afghanistan.⁷ This will be flanked by the continuation of Pakistan's political and diplomatic support to the Taliban. As concerns the future of a [foreign military presence](#) in Afghanistan, Pakistan insists that all sides must remain committed to the peace process/APN – including a U.S. withdrawal scheduled as agreed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, thus respecting the [May 1 deadline](#). Nevertheless, '[Pakistan is not averse to the idea of US-led international forces extending their stay in Afghanistan until a political deal is reached through intra-Afghan talks](#)'. An official of the Pakistani army [stated](#) in an interview after a [meeting](#) on February 19, 2021 between the Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa and General Frank McKenzie, Commander, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM): 'Pakistan's military leaders "would not be unhappy" if the United States extended its departure date' – 'there has to be a responsible withdrawal', 'rather than a chaotic pullout'. However, besides emphasizing that Pakistan 'would welcome a postponement of the departure of foreign forces in Afghanistan', the same Pakistani military official (who spoke under the condition of anonymity) also [stressed](#) that such a delay in a U.S./NATO troop pull-out 'should be negotiated with the Taliban in order to avoid a relaunch of conflict'.

⁶ [In the words](#) of the SAPM Yusuf: 'the dialogue between two countries has to move beyond Afghanistan as the peace process has been reached and "previous US administration acknowledged Pakistan's role [in Afghan peace talks] and the fact that it would not have happened without Pakistan."'

⁷ A view also [shared](#) by Afghan officials.

At the moment, it remains unclear how the new Biden administration will handle the upcoming challenges in Afghanistan in general and the “staying, delaying or leaving” puzzle in particular. However, after observing the latest statements by U.S. officials, it seems that Washington plans to follow the entrenched patterns of the past: ‘embracing Pakistan’ and setting aside the bitterness of the country’s involvement in undermining the war and peace efforts of the U.S./NATO in Afghanistan in order to convince the Pakistani leadership to support U.S. interests in said Afghanistan. It is interesting to recall that Biden indicated during his presidential campaign that he wills a stronger role by Pakistan in ending the war in Afghanistan⁸, obviously including a ‘military dimension’, namely the provision of bases within Pakistan for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. Biden [stated](#): ‘We can prevent the United States from being the victim of terror coming out of Afghanistan by providing for bases - insist the Pakistanis provide bases for us to air lift from and to move against what we know.’ The observation of comments by U.S. officials suggests that this option is still circulating among some U.S. security circles.⁹ U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin described Pakistan as an ‘essential partner in any peace process in Afghanistan’¹⁰ and suggested that military-to-military ties should be improved.¹¹ However, Biden’s comment regarding a potential “Pakistan option” for the U.S. military was rejected by Pakistani officials at that time. It remains highly unlikely that Pakistan changes its views and becomes willing to serve as a host country for a U.S. military presence conducting counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan.

⁸ In a keynote address (February 8, 2021) at the Middle East Institute (MEI) in Washington, D.C., General McKenzie [stated](#): ‘They [Pakistan]’ve helped us in some way”; however, he also added that “We sometimes wish they would do more.’

⁹ US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin [stressed](#): ‘Pakistan will play an important role in any political settlement in Afghanistan. We also need to work with Pakistan to defeat Al Qaeda and the militant Islamic State (Khorasan) group (IS-K) and to enhance regional stability.’ see also: Ignatius, D. (2021, February 19). [Opinion: Here’s Biden’s least bad option in Afghanistan](#). Washington Post.

¹⁰ Moreover, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin [stated that](#): ‘I understand Pakistan has taken constructive steps to meet US requests in support of the Afghanistan peace process.’

¹¹ US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#): ‘I will focus on our shared interests, which include training future Pakistan military leaders through the use of International Military Education and Training funds.’

Islamabad will continue to engage with the U.S. in both Afghanistan and the APN. However, Pakistan now wants to focus on a ‘economic security paradigm’. In other words, Pakistan aims to establish itself as the new connectivity hub in the region and wants to offer the U S ‘[economic bases, not military bases](#)’. Special Advisor to the Prime Minister (SAPM) Yusuf [stressed](#) that Pakistan wants to ensure that relations between Islamabad and Washington ‘are not clouded by hyphenating the relationship with US policy towards other countries in the region’. Instead, as [stated](#) by Qureshi, ‘They [the US] should come, compete and invest’ – an obvious reference to China. As such, Pakistani officials and experts are calling for a complete ‘[reset](#)’ of ties with the US based on ‘[fresh conversations](#)’ [beyond Afghanistan](#) and on the ‘geostrategic salience of Pakistan’.

In sum, the envisaged disentanglement of Pakistan-U.S. ties from Pakistan-China relations seems improbable considering the persistently growing leverage by China both in Pakistan and in the extended Afghanistan-Pakistan area. Moreover, the rapidly growing defence collaboration between Islamabad and Beijing cannot be ignored by the U.S. due to its impacts on Pakistan’s neighbours, foremost India and Iran and their respective Afghan policies. Moreover, after considering the multitude of existential challenges Afghanistan and the extended South Asian region are facing, a complete reset of relations between Pakistan and the U.S. (a will to rebuild these along predominantly economic lines) can be described as a “visionary endeavour” at best.

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