

Pakistan's Dilemma: Cut ties with the US in favour of China!

By Abdul Majeed Bhatti*

In August last year, Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, which consisted of applying greater pressure on the Pakistanis to support US counter-terrorism operations. At the beginning of January 2018 Trump launched into a public tirade about Pakistan's complicity in aiding and abetting terrorist groups on its soil. Pakistan bitterly opposes Trump's version of events and points to the huge sacrifices made in prosecuting America's global war on terror since 2001. Pakistan is not alone in criticizing the Trump administration. Some have suggested that America's harsh stance risks pushing Pakistan into China's sphere of influence thereby reducing America's advantage in any counter-terrorism effort.

Since September 2001, America has adopted a muddled strategy towards Afghanistan, and the only common strand amongst the strategies adopted by the three successive US administrations is to maintain forward operating bases in the country. The aim is to exploit these bases to undertake reconnaissance and special missions against all the countries that abut Afghanistan. Beyond this however, America's operating strategy can be categorized into three distinct phases.

During Bush's first administration, America's focus was on winning the Afghan war outright. This strategy consisted of dislodging the Taliban from power and cobbling together a nascent Afghan government with Hamid Karzai at the helm supported by the warlords of the Northern Alliance. Pakistan fully played its part in facilitating talks that led to the Bonn agreement. Once Karzai's transitional government took shape, America priorities changed and Washington focused on the next neoconservative project—regime change in Iraq.

America's Afghan strategy quickly changed to managing the confrontation between the Afghan resistance and Karzai's authority. During this period of managed chaos, America was entirely happy to leave Pakistan to control the militants on its soil, so long as they did not constitute an existential threat to Karzai's reign. This tactic—perfected in Central and South America where both the rebels and government forces (supported by US) fought each other—enabled America to continue with its occupation of Afghanistan. Hence, in many ways, America played along with Pakistan's duplicity. The overlooking by US officials of the Taliban Shura Council stationed in Quetta was just one example of this duplicity.

However, the arrival of the Obama administration oversaw the execution of several strategies, which resulted in a convoluted response. At times, the US was interested in winning the war and refused to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban. On certain occasions, the US pressurized Pakistan to seek and destroy Afghan militants hiding in the tribal areas, and when the US realized the war was unwinnable, the Obama administration pushed for peace on its own terms. Eventually, the second Obama administration haunted by the Syrian fiasco decided to formally exit the Afghan war leaving behind a token force. This period was also a humiliating experience for the US army and resulted in open fissures between military generals

and Washington. Today, the generals around Trump want to reverse this embarrassment.

Meanwhile, the Pakistani army as an institution does not trust the US, and has resisted any real attempt by the US to eliminate Afghan militant safe heavens in Pakistan. Pakistan's behaviour is predicated on the belief that America's close relations with India warrants a revival of Pakistan's strategic depth in Afghanistan. Subsequently, Pakistan is extremely reluctant to compromise its proxies in Afghanistan—a point strongly underscored by US envoy Olson to Pakistan in a recent New York Times opinion piece.

As for China, Beijing is fearful of stronger American Indian ties on China's Western border. On China's Eastern border, the US is using the North Korean issue to cement ties with Asian Pacific countries, deploy advance weapons in South Korea and carry out joint military maneuvers with Australia, Japan and India. Consequently, China feels that America is boxing it in from both sides, and the spat between Islamabad and Washington is Beijing's opportunity of supplanting American influence in Pakistan and returning a degree of military balance in the Asian subcontinent.

China's willingness to replace the American raj with the Chinese raj has to be matched by Islamabad's willingness to ensure such a transformation takes place. Despite China's billion-dollar investment in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the linking of the Rupee to the Yuan to settle all bilateral payments, the generals in Islamabad are dithering about what to do.

The solution to Pakistan's current predicament is not in continued subservience to American stipulations or to replace American hegemony with Chinese hegemony. Pakistan is a powerful nuclear state and possesses the capability to play China, India and America off one another thereby overcoming American domination in the region. However, this is exclusively achieved through the re-establishment of the Caliphate (Khilafah). The first Islamic state in Madina was not satisfied with Roman or Persian primacy in the region and successfully challenged and defeated both great powers to usher in the golden age of Islam.

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