Re-examining the Centrality of Pak-US Ties to South Asia[1]

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the centrality of Pakistan-United States (US) ties vis-à-vis South Asia, beginning with an acknowledgement of historical consistencies, and the challenges posed to them in the Trump era. It then argues why the bilateral relationship is likely to retain its centrality, based on two cases: a case for convergence, and a case for divergence. The first option articulates how joint pursuits for peace in Afghanistan, and shifting economic alliances, render Pak-US cooperation integral to the South Asian security order. In the second case, differing counterterrorism positions – despite a joint pursuit for stability – demand immediate reconciliation and realignment of interests. These findings establish the degree of importance Pak-US ties continue to hold for South Asian stability, and warn that undermining the relationship can starve the region of a viable alternative.

Keywords: US-Pak Ties, Convergence, Divergence, Geoeconomics, Counterterrorism, Afghanistan Peace.

[1] An excerpt from this research paper was published by the author in *Express Tribune*, titled "Re-assessing Pakistan-US Centrality," November 6, 2019, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2094137/6-re-assessing-pakistan-us-centrality/.

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JoCA ■ Vol. 4 (1&2): 95-116.

Introduction

Spread over seven decades, Pakistan-United States (Pak-US) relations enjoy historic centrality to South Asia. This became evident during the 1980s, when defence cooperation began to peak in Afghanistan.[2] Additionally, both Washington and Islamabad demonstrated mutual dependence in engaging with key powers: the formalisation of Sino-US ties through Pakistan, and the latter's communication to Delhi via Washington.[3] However, with the distancing of Pakistan from US military designs in Afghanistan – and a consequent hardline from the Trump administration – experts on both ends of the spectrum have begun to question whether the relationship is beginning to lose its deep-rooted centrality.

This paper argues that despite recent complications, joint pursuits for peace in Afghanistan, shifting economic alliances, and differing counterterrorism viewpoints are likely to sustain Pak-US centrality to South Asia. It begins by establishing the historic basis for diplomatic and strategic convergence between both countries, and the reasons underpinning post-Trump bilateral discord. The paper also details India's threat perception within Pakistan's foreign policy calculus, and how the former's confrontational role over the past four decades has shifted Washington's focus from Islamabad to New Delhi. It puts the spotlight on Islamabad's resistance to the hardline US approach, and reveals the motivations among US experts to view Pakistan differently. Finally, the paper presents two cases where bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and the US is most likely to remain central: *a case for convergence*, and *a case for divergence*. In the former, limited defence cooperation threatens to compound Pakistan's prospects of cross-border peace with Afghanistan, and endangers US demilitarisation interests. Moreover, securitising South Asia's emerging economic order is also contingent upon consistent Pak-US engagement. In the latter case, frequent distrust can easily undermine joint Pak-US counterterrorism objectives in South Asia. Integrating divergent

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[2] Robert M. Hathaway, *The Leverage Paradox: Pakistan and the United States* (Washington, D.C: Wilson Center, 2017), 36, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-leverage-paradox.

[3] "Memorandum of Conversation: Hilaly, Kissinger, and Saunders," US Department of State, accessed July 10, 2020, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e13/72406.htm.

counterterrorism priorities into an overarching strategy can create a strong case for Pak-US centrality to South Asia.

Historical Consistencies in Pak-US Security Ties

Two security considerations dominate the history of Pak-US relations. First, the view that Afghanistan serves as the engine of regional stability. Second, the utility Islamabad and Washington afforded each other in reaching out to key powers.

Afghanistan as a Regional Counterweight

Both Pakistan and the US have relied heavily on Afghanistan to contain the influence of regional rivals. Washington's extensive financial, training and intelligence support to the Afghan *mujahideen* during the 1980s, helped fuel resistance to the Soviet occupation.[4] The US viewed Soviet Union's footprint in Afghanistan as a 'threat of further Soviet expansion into neighboring countries in Southwest Asia', undermining US ascendancy in the Cold War.[5] Pakistan's decision to join the US covert operation, in exchange for economic aid, left Afghanistan as the pillar of Pak-US strategic convergence between late 70s and the mid-1980s.

A similar US approach to regional balance became evident in October 2001, when *Operation Enduring Freedom* signaled Washington's 19-year long engagement in the Afghan war. Washington encouraged President Hamid Karzai to demonstrate greater dependency on Afghan warlords, and on frequent occasions, suggested that he distrust them.[6] The Bush Administration itself gave rise to these divisive warlords in

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[4] Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 145-146.

[5] Kyle Tadman, "An American Provocation: US Foreign Policy during the Soviet-Afghanistan War," *Western Illinois Historical Review* 5 (Spring 2013): 31-65 (50), http://www.wiu.edu/cas/history/wihr/pdfs/Tadman-AnAmericanProvocationVol5.pdf.

[6] Ronald E. Neumann, *Failed Relations between Hamid Karzai and the United States: What Can We Learn?* report (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2015), https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/05/failed-relations-between-hamid-karzai-and-united-states-what-can-we-learn.

Afghanistan's domestic political scene, urging Karzai to follow suit.[7] The extent to which such internal maneuverings eased Washington's fight against the Taliban remains unclear. But the broadening of US interests in Kabul's governance framework significantly influenced the leadership's attitude towards its people, as well as toward key regional powers – including Pakistan.

One result of Pakistan's Cold War cooperation with the US was an acceleration in its military and economic competition with India. Numerous wars took place between the two powers, and India's decision to proceed with nuclear tests in 1974 naturally prioritised Pakistan's own defence considerations. Adding to the complications was Delhi's tacit support for the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1980. Well-documented accounts reveal that Delhi's stated posture of non-alignment was underpinned by a robust national consensus, which pushed for Soviet aggression in Afghanistan.[8] One of Delhi's core rationales was to keep Pakistan's newfound alliance with the US at bay. Ultimately, India and Pakistan found themselves on opposite ends of the Cold War pendulum, reflective of a polarising South Asian security order that demanded Pakistan's attention.

Trends in Pakistan's regional stability support vis-à-vis Afghanistan are evident even today. Islamabad remains skeptic of Delhi's developmental assistance to Afghanistan, viewing it as a build-up to India's cross-border provocation.[9] As a response, Islamabad has pushed for diplomatic dialogue with Kabul, consistently affirming peaceful solutions to Afghanistan's internal conflicts and furthering measures for regional security.

Though Pakistan and the US have deployed two fairly different approaches to Afghanistan, both have unequivocally relied on it to bring regional balancing goals to fruition.

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7 Neumann, *Failed Relations between Hamid Karzai and the United States*, 12.

8 Partha S. Ghosh and Rajaram Panda, "Domestic Support for Mrs. Gandhi's Afghan Policy: The Soviet Factor in Indian Politics," *Asian Survey* 23, no. 3 (March 1983): 261-279 (265), https://doi.org/10.2307/2644273.

9 Nandita Palrecha and Monish Tourangbam, "India's Development Aid to Afghanistan: Does Afghanistan Need What India Gives?" *Diplomat,* November 24, 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/indias-development-aid-to-afghanistan-does-afghanistan-need-what-india-gives/.

Allies as Mediums of Engagement

Washington and Islamabad have also depended on one another to reach out to key powers. The US deemed Pakistan crucial to establishing formal diplomatic ties with China.[10] During the 1970s, Washington's deep-seated skepticism of Beijing was overtaken by its heightening Cold War tussle with Moscow. Beijing's contentious relationship with the Soviets suggested a critical addition to US containment efforts. To get through to China, however, President Richard Nixon began improving ties with Pakistan. By the 1970s, Islamabad emerged as Washington's primary medium of engagement.[11] President Yahya Khan's visit to Beijing in October 1970 was seen as an opportunity by Washington to assure Beijing of non-interference in its internal affairs (regardless of the outcome with the Soviets), and that US Ambassadors were ready to be sent. Zhou Enlai's warm reception of US intent was again relayed through Islamabad, and Pakistan became a central pivot in constant US-Sino messaging.[12] Henry Kissinger's landmark trip to Beijing in July 1971 – to take contentious US-Sino foreign policy issues head-on – was a direct result of Pakistan's close diplomatic alignment with Beijing, and its favourable proximity to Washington.

In recent decades, the US has utilised the Pakistani channel to approach the Afghan Taliban too.[13] Washington deems the Taliban a key

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[10] William Burr, ed., *The Beijing-Washington Back-Channel and Henry Kissinger's Secret Trip to China: September 1970-July 1971*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 66 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2002), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/.

[11] William Burr, ed., "Memorandum of Conversation: Meeting between the President and Pakistan President Yahya," in *The Beijing-Washington Back-Channel and Henry Kissinger's Secret Trip to China: September 1970-July 1971,* National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 66 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2002), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-03.pdf.

[12] William Burr, ed., "Message from Zhou Enlai to Nixon, 21 April 1971, rec'd 27 April 1971, Responding to Nixon's 16 December 1970 Message" in *The Beijing-Washington Back-Channel and Henry Kissinger's Secret Trip to China: September 1970-July 1971*), National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 66 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 2002), https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-17.pdf.

[13] Asif Shahzad and Charlotte Greenfield, "Taliban, US Envoy in Pakistan to Review Broken Peace Talks," *Reuters,* October 2, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-pakistan/taliban-u-s-envoy-in-pakistan-to-review-broken-peace-talks-idUSKBN1WH09A.

stakeholder in Kabul's security framework. Initially, the Afghan government itself called on Pakistan to encourage direct talks with the Taliban, and help end the decades-long conflict.[14] In recent years, however, Washington has regarded Islamabad as a *'fallback option'* whenever the former has undergone a spike in trust deficit with the Taliban. For example, the Trump administration's decision to call off US-Taliban peace talks in September 2019, was a direct result of the Taliban resuming attacks against Afghan civilian and US officials.[15] Pakistan's consequent decision to host the Taliban in Islamabad, proved crucial to mitigating mutual hostilities and resuming dialogue.[16] It laid the groundwork for US Special Representative on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad's October visit to Kabul, a month after President Trump cancelled talks with the Taliban and dealt the Afghan peace process a major blow.

The Trump administration has been pushing hard for a ceasefire agreement with the Afghan Taliban in the past three years – one that guarantees withdrawal of US military troops if the Taliban pledge not to use Afghanistan as a future base for militant attacks.[17]

The kind of tangible leverage Pakistan possesses in getting the Taliban to adhere to the US-led peace talks has been subject to speculation. However, Pakistan's civilian and military leaderships have been clear on the reasons underpinning their support for the Afghan peace process (the process including both intra-Afghan talks and the US-Taliban negotiations). Both

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[14] Amina Khan, "Prospects for Peace in Afghanistan," *Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2016): 32-35, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2-Amina_Khan_SS_Vol_36_No.1_2016.pdf.

[15] "How Trump's Plan to Secretly Meet with the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart," *New York Times*, September 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-camp-david-taliban.html.

[16] "US Envoy, Taliban Leadership Said to Meet in Pakistan for First Time since Talks Scuttled," *Washington Post,* October 4, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-envoy-taliban-leadership-meet-in-pakistan-for-first-time-since-talks-scuttled/2019/10/04/e0359eda-e694-11e9-a331-2df12d56a80b_story.html.

[17] Pamela Constable, "Marathon Talks between Taliban and Prominent Afghans Conclude with Positive - If Vague - Peace Road-Map," *Washington Post,* July 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/talks-between-taliban-insurgents-and-prominent-afghans-cordial-but-vague/2019/07/09/79a7e820-a1e9-11e9-bd56-eac6bb02d01d_story.html.

leaderships cite a secure territorial border with Afghanistan as the prerequisite to regional peace.[18] Successive US governments have also acknowledged Pakistan's endorsement of a political solution to the 19-year conflict.

On numerous occasions in the past, Pakistan too has approached the US to get its messages across to New Delhi, especially on Kashmir. Notable examples include President Kennedy's 1962 Anglo-American mission, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's 1999 talks with the Clinton administration, and President Obama's appeal to Kashmir settlements in his 2008 campaign.[19] President Trump's recurring offers to mediate on Kashmir – although short-lived – were also the result of Pakistan's consistent critique of Delhi's abrogation of Article 370 in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJ&K).

The Indian Factor in Pak-US Relations

From the Islamabad-Washington alliance of the Cold War to present times, New Delhi has been very skeptical of Pak-US relations. It deployed a non-alignment posture towards Afghanistan during the Soviet resistance, and used it as a springboard to win over Washington's trust once the Afghan insurgency proved costly for Pakistan's sovereign interests.[20] New Delhi backed the controversial Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to undermine Kabul's political transitions, furthering the potential for cross-border instability in Pakistan's eyes.

By 2006, President George W. Bush decided to deny Pakistan a nuclear deal, and instead signed the 123 Agreement between Delhi and

[18] Drazen Jorgic, "Pakistan Says Starts Fencing Afghanistan Border in High-Threat Zones," *Reuters,* March 27, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-afghanistan-border-idUSKBN16Y0KR.

[19] Sumit Ganguly, "The United States Can't Solve the Kashmir Dispute," *Foreign Affairs,* July 30, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2019-07-30/united-states-cant-solve-kashmir-dispute; and, Howard B. Schaffer, *The Limits of Influence: America's Role in Kashmir* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 195.

[20] Ravi Tomar, *India-US Relations in a Changing Strategic Environment* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2002), https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp0102/02RP20.

Washington – also known as the India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement.[21] This effectively gave India access to 'full civil and nuclear cooperation' at the cost of Washington's bilateral relations with Pakistan. All these dynamics were construed by Pakistan as an impediment to its larger peace-building efforts in South Asia, and would later constitute a major share of US criticism under President Trump.

A case in point is Pakistan's willingness to balance India's asymmetrical leverage in South Asia by acquiring nuclear weapons. The move continues to be viewed by Washington's strategic community as compelling proof of an arms race.[22] The same thread cuts across on counterterrorism fronts as well: President Trump criticised Islamabad for allegedly hosting terrorist safe havens. He also asserted that Washington had 'foolishly given Pakistan more than $33 billion in aid over the last 15 years.'[23] All these developments were received warmly in New Delhi.

Since 2017, the Indian diaspora has also lobbied relentlessly to declare Pakistan a terrorist state at the hands of US Congress. However, these efforts proved unsuccessful.[24] Indian intelligentsia has tried to deflect the costs of India's own contentious policies on Islamabad – such as the militarisation of Kashmir. This was amply witnessed during the Pulwama terror attack and subsequent Balakot airstrikes. Moreover, the advent of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP leadership has helped bolster Indian opposition to Pakistan's anti-terror financing efforts at the Asia Pacific Group (APG), compounding Islamabad's prospects of implementing the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Action Plan in its entirety.

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[21] Elisabeth Bumiller and Carlotta Gall, "Bush Rules Out a Nuclear Deal with Pakistanis," *New York Times,* March 5, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/05/world/asia/bush-rules-out-a-nuclear-deal-with-pakistanis.html.

[22] Michael Krepon, "South Asia's Distinctive Arms Race," *Arms Control Today* 42, no.9 (November 2012): 35-38, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012-11/south-asia%E2%80%99s-distinctive-arms-race.

[23] Saba Aziz, "Pakistan-US War of Words over Donald Trump's Tweet," *Al Jazeera,* January 2, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/pakistan-war-words-donald-trump-tweet-180102055709366.html.

[24] "We Do Not Support Declaring Pakistan a Terrorist State: USA," *Economic Times,* July 12, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/we-do-not-support-declaring-pakistan-a-terrorist-state-usa/articleshow/54730147.cms?from=mdr.

Strained Relations under the Trump Administration

An Uncompromising Start

Shortly after the election of President Donald Trump in 2017, Pak-US relations experienced sharp discord. This was led by Trump's *Afghanistan and South Asia* strategy in August, which erroneously declared Pakistan a safe haven for violent groups operating in the region.[25] Though previous US administrations have resorted to similar positions, Trump's direct attribution of all violent cross-border activities to Pakistan quickly sparked discomfort in Islamabad. The allegations provided zero evidence of Pakistan's sponsorship of cross-border militancy, as asserted by the premier. Pakistan's National Security Committee, comprising of top civilian and military leaders, called on the US for 'effective and immediate US military efforts to eliminate sanctuaries harboring terrorists and miscreants on the Afghan soil, including those responsible for fomenting terror in Pakistan.'[26]

From the US perspective, such accusations are aimed at maximising public support for US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. To achieve this domestic objective, it becomes favourable for Washington to routinely depict Pakistan as a source of instability in Afghanistan, while negating key considerations – such as the motivations and goals of India's increasing presence in the region. Limited emphasis on *which* US policy failures triggered the 19-year Afghan war, and *why* successive administrations clung to a militaristic solution to the Afghan conflict – seem to have drawn minimum attention from President Trump. Instead, sacrifices by US military personnel – in both blood and treasure – have featured prominently in the President's rhetoric to the US masses.

By consistently overlooking Pakistan's counterterrorism support, including the dismantling of Taliban strongholds and over 70,000 in civilian and military casualties, the Trump administration is able to secure two key

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[25] "Full Transcript and Video: Trump's Speech on Afghanistan," *New York Times,* August 21, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-speech-afghanistan.html.

[26] Asad Hashim, "Pakistan in the Crosshairs of Trump's Afghan Strategy," *Al Jazeera,* August 24, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/pakistan-crosshairs-trump-afghan-strategy-170824052758366.html.

interests. First, to sidestep rapprochement with Pakistan, as such a move could easily invite discontent from key US allies in South Asia. Second, to further delay US action against anti-Pakistan militant groups operating out of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, such as Jamaat ul Ahrar.[27] Such a policy would demand the US to take responsibility for its own counterterrorism shortcomings, a position the Trump administration has been keen on avoiding.

Economic Threats

The Trump administration's suspension of security assistance to Pakistan has also been a compounding factor in bilateral tensions. In 2017, the then-US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson signaled that the 'amount of aid and military assistance' provided to Pakistan can be used as leverage against it if US 'counterterrorism objectives' are not met.[28] By 2018, the Trump administration delivered on the threat: Washington halted USD 1.3 billion in annual aid to Pakistan. What the US failed to realise, however, was that this annual aid to Pakistan was tied to the Coalition Support Fund (CRF) – a reimbursement to Islamabad for its operations against militants. Eliminating this assistance, thus, debunked Washington's own commitment to facilitating a war against South Asian militancy.

Additionally, what prompted this cancellation in aid was not the pretense of Pakistan's 'counterterrorism failures'. In reality, increasing domestic frustrations regarding US military blowbacks in Afghanistan, sparked President Trump's hardline towards Islamabad. This is evident across numerous addresses made by the US President – from his State of the Union Address to domestic rallies – where the suffering and homecoming of US troops have been consistently invoked to appease supporters. 'Time to bring them [US troops in Afghanistan] home. We've done our job, we've defeated everyone that we're supposed to defeat. And now we are, we are policing, we

[27] Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan Sets Terms for Help in Anti-terror Fight," *Dawn,* August 25, 2017, https://www.dawn.com/news/1353723.

[28] Hathaway, *The Leverage Paradox: Pakistan and the United States*, 5.

are now policing', spoke Donald Trump during a campaign rally in Minnesota.[29]

In order to present the promise of US troop withdrawal as credible to voters (and simultaneously dress the Afghan war as a *success*), Washington finds it convenient to label Pakistan as the host of anti-Afghan militant safe havens. The immediate result: Deflecting Washington's military failures on Islamabad, including the empowerment of the Afghan Taliban, and a fresh crop of anti-US fighter outfits. 'Instead of making Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures, the US should do a serious assessment of why, despite 140,000 NATO troops plus 250,000 Afghan troops & reportedly $1 trillion spent on war in Afghanistan, the Taliban today are stronger than before', tweeted Prime Minister Imran Khan in response to President Trump's sharp criticism of Pakistan's counterterrorism performance.[30]

Judging by Pakistan's defiance of US threats, it is clear that coercion can no longer serve as an effective tool for Pak-US cooperation, as underlined by experts on Capitol Hill. Pakistan's rebuttal of Trump's threats also confirm that the suspended US aid made only a meagre contribution to Islamabad's counterterrorism losses. 'Pakistan suffered 75,000 casualties in this war [the Afghan conflict] & over $123 bn was lost to economy. US "aid" was a minuscule $20 bn', tweeted Prime Minister Imran Khan in November 2018.[31] Therefore, Washington's economic threats, and Islamabad's consequent resistance, have let the Pak-US frictions grow unabated. Unlike previous US administrations, the Trump leadership has made little effort to address these reservations through diplomatic corridors, which suggests that the strain in bilateral ties is the outcome of a conscious US policy.

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[29] "Donald Trump Minnesota Rally Speech Transcript: Minneapolis, MN Rally October 10, 2019," Rev, October 10, 2019, https://www.rev.com/blog/donald-trump-minnesota-rally-speech-transcript-minneapolis-mn-rally-october-10-2019.

[30] Drazen Jorgic, "Pakistan PM Imran Khan Lashes Out at Trump Tirade," *Reuters,* November 19, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-usa/pakistan-pm-imran-khan-lashes-out-at-trump-tirade-idUSKCN1NO1J9.

[31] Ibid.

A Miscalculation of Pak-China Economic Ties

The Trump administration has made frequent attempts at questioning Pakistan's economic relations with China. In July 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo termed Pakistan's pursuit for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout package as an attempt to payback Chinese lenders – negating the country's genuine quest for economic relief. 'Make no mistake. We will be watching what the IMF does,' remarked Pompeo. 'There's no rationale for IMF tax dollars, and associated with that American dollars that are part of the IMF funding, for those to go to bail out Chinese bondholders or China itself.'[32]

On the contrary, China's multibillion dollar investment in Pakistan is not subject to immediate pay-offs; it is contingent upon the operationalisation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is still in the process of completion. Thus, any prospect of repayment would serve as a bilateral initiative, independent of the IMF's rules and procedures.[33]

Moreover, the reporting techniques and agreed-upon conditions of IMF packages do not allow for allocated funds to be redirected to a third-party upon will. There is evidence to prove that Pakistan never cited Chinese payments as a formal provision in its documented negotiations with the IMF. 'We have not had discussions with the authorities about any possible intentions', confirmed a senior IMF official in July 2018.[34] Pompeo's entire assessment stood contradicted.

In light of these details, the Trump administration's pressuring is a deliberate push to limit Chinese investment in Pakistan. It also falsely suggests that the US can coerce IMF into refusing Islamabad. Above all, the diplomatic offensive takes an untimely strike at the long-standing Sino-Pak alliance that has been underpinned by mutual trust and third-party independence for decades. Advances of the kind from Washington have only added to Islamabad's skepticism of bilateral relations: 'The US is trying to

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[32] "US' Pompeo Warns against IMF Bailout for Pakistan That Aids China," *Reuters,* July 31, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-imf-pakistan/us-pompeo-warns-against-imf-bailout-for-pakistan-that-aids-china-idUSKBN1KK2G5.

[33] "Fiscal, Monetary Policies in Line with Required Economic Reforms: Asad Umar," *Express Tribune,* December 12, 2018, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1865249/1-fiscal-monetary-policies-line-required-economic-reforms-asad-umar/

[34] "US' Pompeo Warns against IMF Bailout for Pakistan That Aids China," *Reuters*.

spoil China's biggest contribution to our future', said one senior advisor from the Pakistan government to the *Financial Times*.[35]

Re-examining the Centrality of Pak-US Ties to South Asia

This section argues why Pak-US ties – despite Washington's increasingly assertive approach in above mentioned areas – are likely to remain integral to South Asia. It outlines two potential cases: *'a case for convergence'* – where political conflicts in South Asia are of mutual interest. Second, *'a case for divergence'* – where differing positions on regional objectives make Pak-US cooperation mandatory.

A Case for Convergence

Political Solution to the Afghan Conflict

By early 2018, the Afghan Taliban had solidified itself as a powerful entity in Afghan politics, controlling 56.3 per cent of total districts.[36] Growing frictions with the Ashraf Ghani leadership, which the Taliban considers to be a puppet government of the US, rendered Afghan citizens the primary targets of aggression. In 2019 alone, 611 security incidents rocked the country, with over 2,400 in civilian deaths. Ignoring the Taliban was no longer an option.[37]

Thus, US efforts to strike a peace deal with the insurgent group became the pivot to a wider peace process. This settlement was contingent upon joint Pak-US cooperation, aimed at securing Pakistan's 2,430 kilometer border with Afghanistan, and ending Washington's longest military engagement to date.

Initial headway between the US and the Taliban became evident in an eight-point joint resolution, named the *Roadmap to Peace*, worked out in

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[35] "Pakistan Hits Back at US Resistance to IMF Bailout," *Financial Times,* July 31, 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/ff3a6130-94ba-11e8-b67b-b8205561c3fe.

[36] Alia Chughtai, "Afghanistan: Who Controls What," *Al Jazeera,* June 24, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/afghanistan-controls-160823083528213.html.

[37] "Afghanistan War: Tracking the Killings in August 2019," *BBC News,* September 16, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49662640.

July 2019 in Doha.[38] It confirmed both parties' commitment towards institutionalising Afghanistan's Islamic system, encouraging cohesive peace, and inviting zero-interference from regional powers.

What ended up costing the peace effort its due credibility, was the absence of direct intergovernmental communication between Washington and Islamabad. Kabul had already expressed its skepticism of both Washington and Islamabad. The Ashraf Ghani leadership accused the US of conspiring against the Afghan government, while falsely that Prime Minister Imran Khan was willfully interfering in Afghanistan's domestic affairs.[39]

To deter future skepticism and distrust from Kabul, Imran Khan's meeting with President Trump in July 2019 served great strategic purpose.[40] The encounter confirmed that 'respecting Afghan sovereignty' was significant to both countries – a core value that could lead both the Taliban and the Afghan government to be optimistic in the peace process. In fact, both the Afghan government and the Taliban are on record acknowledging that respect of Afghanistan's sovereignty is paramount. Thus, a continuation of direct intergovernmental communication between Washington and Islamabad is important to dispel hostilities in peace efforts. It is also a necessary step for injecting a positive, forward looking tone into a rather rocky negotiation path with the Afghan Taliban.

Khan and Trump's consensus on a 'political solution' to the Afghan conflict paved the way for another crucial variable in the peace process: Pakistan's willingness to talk to the Taliban, and vice versa. Islamabad's intent to welcome the Taliban and help Washington achieve a trust surplus with the insurgent group, was a contributing factor to the February 2020 Doha Agreement. More importantly, Pakistan's invitation to host the Taliban

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[38] Constable, "Marathon Talks between Taliban and Prominent Afghans Conclude with Positive — If Vague — Peace Road-Map."

[39] Margaret Brennan, "Afghan Official Accuses Top US Envoy of Undermining Ghani Government with Colonial Intentions," *CBS News,* March 14, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghanistan-us-envoy-zalmay-khalilzad-undermining-ghani-hamdullah-mohib-says/; and Hikmat Noori, "Pakistan PM's Remarks on Afghan Peace Process Stir Diplomatic Row," *Al Jazeera,* March 29, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/pakistan-pm-remarks-afghan-peace-process-stir-diplomatic-row-190328115121755.html.

[40] Roberta Rampton and Doina Chiacu, "Trump, Pakistan's Khan Discuss Way Out of Afghanistan War," *Reuters,* July 22, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan/trump-pakistans-khan-discuss-way-out-of-afghanistan-war-idUSKCN1UH1S3.

in early 2019 was construed warmly by Taliban officials – indicative of Islamabad's indispensability to the US-Taliban peace success.[41] Taliban's tendency to steer towards stakeholders other than the US – in a bid to welcome facilitation – gives Pakistan important space to exercise its diplomatic leverage over the Taliban, and underline the merits of a ceasefire.

If there was any doubt about Pakistan's ability to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban for regional peace, it was dispelled with Islamabad's release of Mullah Baradar in 2018 to assist the Doha talks.[42] With Pakistan's deep knowledge of Taliban's violent tendencies and etiquettes of engagement, the Trump administration could appear better equipped to pursue counterterrorism assurances, troop withdrawals, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire. Yet, the fundamental test for both Islamabad and Washington is the extent to which their bilateral ties can sustain newfound momentum. Some key policy differences demand attention.

One, the US objectives to call back its troops and defer prospects of a full-blown Afghan civil war, is set against the guarantee that no terrorist operations would be launched from within Afghanistan. However, what the US misses out in its peace efforts is that the Taliban is under no pressure to comply with the pact. There also seems to be little to compel the insurgent group into relinquishing its pursuit for greater political control in Afghanistan. In fact, Taliban's reluctance to give up political control is evidenced by in its absolute dismissal of the Afghan government, declaring direct talks a red line.[43]

Only when the Afghan government and the Taliban co-exist, can the US post-withdrawal guarantees begin to take their due course. Little suggests that the US is trying to achieve this very objective by doubling down on the Taliban's domestic power tussle.[44] Instead, half-hearted and largely unilateral

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[41] "Afghan Taliban Say Will Visit Pakistan if Formally Invited: BBC Report," *Dawn,* July 25, 2019, https://www.dawn.com/news/1496153.

[42] "Afghan Taliban Founder Mullah Baradar 'Released' by Pakistan," *Al Jazeera,* October 25, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/afghan-taliban-founder-mullah-baradar-released-pakistan-181025093128441.html.

[43] Jibran Ahmad, "Taliban Dismiss Afghanistan's Peace Talks Offer," *Reuters,* December 30, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-dismiss-afghanistans-peace-talks-offer-idUSKCN1OT051.

[44] Anatol Lieven, "It's Time to Trust the Taliban," *Foreign Policy,* January 31, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/31/its-time-to-trust-the-taliban/.

US strategies directly compound Pakistan's desire to have a safe and secure neighbourhood in the aftermath of US military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In late 2019, President Trump's decision to call off talks with the Afghan Taliban at Camp David marked a grave misfortune for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. 'If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don't have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway,' tweeted the President.[45]

Such a move could easily fuel the Taliban's push for an 'Islamic Emirate' in Kabul. The group's long history of resisting the Afghan state is empowered with such diplomatic slowdown from Washington, especially when President Trump's disengagement cites the 'loss of US lives' – instead of the thousands of Afghan casualties at the centre of the conflict.[46]

Hence, overcoming the Taliban's deep-seated belligerence requires the Trump administration to refrain from taking unilateral action in the peace process. Such action could easily disregard Washington's concern for Islamabad's interests in the Afghan situation, which includes keeping the Taliban exchange unharmed, and shielding South Asia from a violent Taliban resurgence. Research on minority ethnic groups in South Asia – as well as around the world – shows that the more a region is politically excluded, the larger its potential for insurgent violence.[47] The Pakistan-Afghanistan region is no exception.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has repeatedly warned that the absence of a peacefully settled political solution in Afghanistan could render the war indefinite. Pakistan's efforts to bring the Taliban back on the negotiating table multiple times in the past four years, counters unilateral action in Afghanistan, and serves as a testament to complete cooperation with the US.

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[45] Michael Safi, "Taliban Warns of More US Dead after Trump Says He Cancelled Peace Talks," *Guardian,* September 8, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/08/donald-trump-says-he-was-due-to-host-taliban-at-camp-david.

[46] "Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track," International Crisis Group, October 2, 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b159-getting-afghanistan-peace-process-back-track.

[47] Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min, "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis," *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 87-119, doi:10.1017/S0043887109990219.

It is in Washington's interests to reciprocate this approach through state-to-state deliberations with Islamabad.

A Shifting Economic Trajectory

Both Pakistan and the US have chosen to bolster economic partnerships with powers of their choosing. The Trump and Modi administrations have been at the centre of a robust Indo-US economic alliance, with bilateral trade crossing USD 142 billion in 2018, steering towards the USD 500 billion mark.[48] India has also emerged as one of the largest markets for US arms and defence equipment in the world.[49]

Pakistan, on the other hand, has resisted its historic reliance on US aid, and chose to immerse in a multi-billion dollar economic partnership with iron-ally China. The bulk of the cooperation centres on USD 62 billion for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Its potential to generate returns post-operations is deemed inevitable by both Chinese and Pakistani officials. Moreover, trends in increased Sino-Pak bilateral trade – including a USD 5 billion pledge from over 50 Chinese companies in Pakistan – dwarf any level of financial assistance ever provided by the US.[50] Pakistan's tilt towards China is also devoid of stringent conditions and counterterrorism allegations, such as those communicated by Washington.

In light of Islamabad and Washington's shifting economic trajectories in South Asia, it is absolutely central for both countries to demonstrate favourable recognition of each other's independent pursuits. Consider the Trump administration's hardline approach to the CPEC initiative. It is headlined by baseless accusations that Pakistani authorities are bound to redirect IMF funds towards the Chinese. Such posturing is likely to

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[48] Kashish Parpiani, "India-US Relations under Trump: Guarding against Transactionalism by Pivoting to the US Legislature" (brief no. 262, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, 2018), 3, https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-us-relations-under-trump-guarding-against-transactionalism-by-pivoting-to-the-us-legislature-45058/.

[49] "India's Arms Imports from US up by 550%: Report," *Hindu*, March 13, 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indias-arms-imports-from-us-up-by-550-report/article23166097.ece.

[50] "Chinese Companies Pledge to Invest $5bn in Pakistan," *Daily Times,* July 13, 2019, https://dailytimes.com.pk/429278/chinese-companies-pledge-to-invest-5bn-in-pakistan/.

toughen reciprocity from Pakistan whenever US seeks defence cooperation in South Asia. Instead, it is in America's interests to understand the factors that underpin the Sino-Pakistan economic alliance. Deliberations here can also limit US opposition to Pakistan's future engagements with Beijing.

China's thorough consideration of Pakistan's economic well-being became amply evident during its support for Islamabad's terror regulation case before the FATF.[51] Crucial bilateral loans to offset stringent IMF conditions also helped cultivate Beijing's favourable image in Islamabad. As one Washington-based expert notes: 'The problem for America is this: Pakistan can afford to walk away. A few hundred million dollars isn't much of a stick anymore.' 'The China-Pakistan relationship is now worth $110 [billion], with around $4 [billion] expected this year. And those billions come easy. For $900 [million, her estimate of current US aid levels to Pakistan], Pakistan endures a volatile, loveless affair with the US while China offers billions without drama.'[52]

Thus, it is in the Trump administration's best interests to view the Pakistan-China convergence less as an impediment, and more as an outcome of Pakistan's independent economic choices - one which should invite acknowledgement and respect, if future Pak-US cooperation is to be prioritised in South Asia.

In terms of the Indo-US strategic partnership, Washington must take note of the merits of Pakistan's reservations towards a wider Indian role in South Asia. Part of the 'arms race' driving US concerns in the region is tied to India's increasing access to defence and missile sales – a provision sanctioned by Washington.[53] Moreover, since August 2017, President Trump's decision to give India a broader role in South Asia – underlined by developmental assistance to Afghanistan – puts the region in a troubling state of affairs.[54] The US wants to engage Pakistan in the easing of the US-Taliban deadlock, but seems to be giving Delhi the open hand in Kabul through

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[51] "China Denounces FATF Members for Pursuing Political Agenda against Pakistan," *Express Tribune,* October 29, 2019, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2089153/3-china-denounces-fatf-members-pursuing-political-agenda-pakistan/.

[52] Hathaway, *The Leverage Paradox: Pakistan and the United States*, 147.

[53] Dinshaw Mistry, "US Arms Sales to India*," Asia Pacific Bulletin,* July 8, 2014, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb271.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=34644.

[54] "Full Transcript and Video: Trump's Speech on Afghanistan," *New York Times*.

sizeable infrastructure and developmental investments. It is Pakistan, not India, that has shouldered the weight of most of the diplomatic lobbying, peace-seeking, and facilitation with the Taliban at the behest of the US. It is against this backdrop that the objectives underpinning India's stronger economic footprint in Afghanistan, demand clarity from Washington. In the absence of sufficient scrutiny, Pakistan's skepticism of the US foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan is well-founded. Moreover, only when Islamabad's economic ties with China are appreciated in the same light as the Indo-US economic partnership, a culture of peace and mutual respect can compliment future Pak-US cooperation in South Asia.

A Case for Divergence

Differing Counterterrorism Positions

Divergent counterterrorism positions, including selective US operations against anti-Pakistan outfits operating out of Afghanistan, make bilateral cooperation evermore pivotal.[55] The Trump administration made it clear that it wishes to eliminate all present and future anti-US militant outfits within South Asia. However, Washington shows no signs of accelerating crackdowns against Afghan-based Islamist groups that continue to target military and civilian facilities in Pakistan.[56] US willingness to falsely attribute major militant attacks in Afghanistan to Pakistan – without ramping up intelligence-based counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan's East – marks a major discord in Pak-US priorities for peace. In an important testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, former United States Institute of Peace affiliate and Pakistan expert Moeed Yusuf outlined the merits of Pak-US cooperation:

> Much of the present strategic divergence of interest between the two sides is Afghanistan-specific. Should Pakistan and the US manage to work together and find a mutually

[55] "Pakistan 'Disappointed' at Annual US Terrorism Report," *Newsweek,* November 5, 2019, https://www.newsweekpakistan.com/pakistan-disappointed-at-annual-u-s-terrorism-report/.

[56] Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan Sets Terms for Help in Anti-terror Fight," *Dawn,* August 25, 2017, https://www.dawn.com/news/1353723.

> acceptable negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, a sustained relationship beyond that would by definition be for Pakistan's sake alone. The basis for Pakistani perceptions about fickleness of the US partnership, transactional nature of the relationship, and even anti-American sentiment would have disappeared. [57]

The underlying sentiment in Capitol Hill is that no degree of Pakistani cooperation, even in the form of the Taliban-US peace process facilitation, would prove adequate. This does not change the fact that Pakistan sacrificed over 70,000 lives in a war built purely on the back of US military designs in Afghanistan. One reason why successive Pakistani governments have struggled to engage the Pakistani diaspora in the US, and cultivate a favourable national image to encourage cooperation, is because of Washington's prioritisation of the India-US strategic partnership.[58] Consider the fact that under President Trump, both New Delhi and Washington agreed that the 'containment of China' – Pakistan's iron-ally – is a long-standing objective.[59] Delivering on this objective demands that Washington distances itself from Islamabad. This is established by the broad-based criticism of former US diplomat for South Asia, Alice Wells, of Islamabad's economic and geostrategic pivot towards Beijing.[60]This criticism has enabled prominent

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[57] Moeed W. Yusuf, *Assessing US Policy and Its Limits in Pakistan: Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee* (United States Institute of Peace, 2011), https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Yusuf Testimony.pdf.

[58] Ashley J. Tellis, Bharath Gopalaswamy, James Cunningham, David Petraeus, Husain Haqqani, Manish Tewari, and Anita McBride, *Review of President Trump's South Asia Strategy: The Way Ahead, One Year In*, report (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/12/11/review-of-president-trump-s-south-asia-strategy-way-ahead-one-year-in-pub-77939.

[59] Arif Rafiq, "America is Making a Bad Bet on India," *National Interest,* February 2, 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-making-bad-bet-india-119316?page=0%2C1.

[60] Hannan R Hussain, "Why US Criticism of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Will Fall on Deaf Ears," *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3042057/why-us-criticism-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-will-fall-deaf?fbclid=IwAR38KWOTtgUPngA1wJwMSHUXFa0rE1hbrj1dYMx56N3uagi1JtyT25LZweY.

advocates of an Indo-US strategic partnership to make their case for closer ties, at the expense of isolating Pakistan.[61]

The result is that neither the US nor the current Afghan government (favourable to New Delhi) is optimally content with Pakistan's policies, among which lie border security, counter-insurgency measures, and engagement with the Taliban. Thus, Pakistan's role, at least in Afghanistan, should be viewed as one of stability by the US. It is also in Washington's larger interests to make greater strides to unearth the actual sources of cross-border dangers affecting both countries.

Conclusion

Though Islamabad has distanced itself from Washington's containment policies in Afghanistan, the region remains central to both countries for achieving lasting peace with the Taliban. Kabul is yet to see a scenario where the absence of diplomatic initiative from Pakistan or the US has furthered the Taliban towards a potential ceasefire. Precisely for this interdependence, any chance of stability in Afghanistan would demand consistent Pak-US cooperation.

On the economic front, Pakistan's strong engagement with China has been viewed by the Trump administration with great skepticism. Baseless accusations of Pakistan misdirecting IMF funds to China, for instance, are likely to toughen reciprocity from Islamabad on any present or future geopolitical challenges faced by Washington in South Asia. Thus, favourable recognition of each other's shifting economic alliances in the region remains a central consideration for future Pak-US engagement.

Lastly, a major source of trust deficit between both countries is a difference in counterterrorism priorities. This was headlined on numerous occasions by the Trump administration, as well as by previous US leaderships. But the fact that both nations are inherently geared towards fighting South Asian militancy, makes reconciliation of differing counterterrorism priorities another central consideration for regional peace.

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[61] "A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," Wilson Center, November 21, 2019, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/conversation-ambassador-alice-wells-the-economic-corridor.

In light of these three rationales, Pak-US ties are likely to withstand policy divergences under the Trump administration, and maintain their centrality to South Asia. Islamabad and Washington have also chosen not to invoke any other regional alternative to the Pak-US partnership. This confirms that all of their shared pursuits in South Asia will suffer in the absence of sustained bilateral cooperation.■