

Biden Presidency and Pakistan

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Executive Summary

Despite being in the US camp during the twentieth and the twenty first century i.e., Cold War (against Communism), Afghan War (Soviet invasion 1979), and Post-9/11 (Global War on Terror-GWoT), bilateral relations between Pakistan and the US have often been on unequal terms. The partnership remained transactional and was based mainly on US foreign policy objectives in the region. Lately, the US government has been viewing its relationship with Pakistan from three angles: (a) as a facilitator of Afghan peace talks; (b) as an ally of China; and (c) as a rival to India. Modus operandi can be different but both parties (Democrats and Republican) think same on these issues mainly. Very little is expected to change in the US foreign policy after the assumption of office by Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States (POTUS). However, Pakistan's engagement with the new US administration should be based on the following principles:-

- National interests (Services rendered as partners in an alliance system should be more covenant unlike earlier engagements where not only secrecy was the norm but also led to unilateral advantages to the US).
- Debt relief and support on FATF.
- Support on the Kashmir issue.
- Post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan.
- US investment in agriculture, infrastructure development, industry, businesses, environment, education and technology, and human resource development.

More specific recommendations are listed at the end of the document.

Issue to be Analysed

The impact of the US President Joe Biden's expected policy directions on Pakistan-US relations need to be analysed in view of different foreign policy orientations of Democratic Administration.

Analysis

- US Pakistan Policy. Except few harsh initial tweets, Pakistan-US relations under Trump administration remained calm and stable. This was in stark contrast to Obama's tenure where drone, Salala, and OBL attacks were the norm. Biden is unlikely to resume Obama's harsh policies but will certainly review Trump's Pakistan policy. Also, the US primacy in the global affairs is one of the most important features of the contemporary international system. The US may continue to call shots as there exists huge gap in state capabilities/national power potential between Pakistan and the US. This also led Pakistan-US relationship to the unilateral advantage of the US mostly. Under the circumstances, US will continue to define the relationship.
- Status Quo. Based on the pattern of mutual relations between Pakistan and the US, there will be no paradigm shift in Pakistan-US relations under Biden's watch. Status-quo ante is likely to continue. The onus is more on Pakistan to imaginatively improve relations with the US as super powers don't do hard work for improving relations with weaker sides in history. They prefer to steer the relationships and same was the case with Pakistan-US engagements.

- Pakistan-China Relations. Biden will not only continue to be strict on China but also be wary of Pakistan-China collaboration, particularly the CPEC's megaprojects. However, it also provides an opportunity for Pakistan to play mediatory role between the US and China as it did in the past.
- US Aid to Pakistan. Over the years, US aid to Pakistan has considerably declined. It is unlikely to have a major revival under Biden rule as well, yet opportunities can be carved. Since both President Biden and Vice President Harris are law graduates and Democratic Party promotes "value-based" foreign policy, they are expected to be inclined to either fund or support programs related to social justice, HR, and debt relief. The US aid can partially be revived as per the "2020 Democratic Platform", the latest detailed document of the Democratic Party that normally comes before each Presidential Election, and Pakistan may benefit from it. The policy makers in Pakistan are suggested to give this document a careful read to get insights into Biden's approach.
- Afghan Peace Process. Trump spoke big and his main focus remained on his country's relationship with NATO, EU, China, money, and trade. Pakistan only found his attention on Afghanistan issue. Since Afghan peace process is already underway, Pakistan-US engagement shall continue to be on positive trajectory under Biden administration, till America finally makes an exit from Afghanistan. In any case, Biden Administration will look at its relations with Pakistan primarily through Afghan lens.
- Post Afghan Peace Situation. Once Afghanistan peace process is settled, Pakistan's position in the US scheme of things will diminish, and one would witness the intensification of US' Indo-Pacific strategy and this is where Pakistan-US relations will again be tested due to Pakistan-China warmth.
- Human Rights Policy. As mentioned earlier, Democratic Party promotes "value-based" foreign policy and takes democracy and Human Rights (HR) seriously, focusing on "civil rights, health care, social security, workers' rights, and women's rights."¹ In October 2019, during House Foreign Affairs Committee, Democrats criticized Trump for setting aside American values for going softer on Indian HR violations. Modi's August 5 actions in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) have been widely criticized.² Modi government seems to be confident to continue to deal with IIOJK and other minorities with iron hand. President Biden may speak on the HR violations in Kashmir or elsewhere in India, but it is not going to pressurize India for the resolution of Kashmir dispute. Unlike Trump, Biden may not be eager to offer mediation between Pakistan and India on Kashmir.
- Asia Pacific (Indo-Pacific) Policy. The "2020 Democratic Party Platform" document states that the US will continue to support India by investing: "in...strategic partnership with India—the world's largest democracy, a nation of great diversity, and a growing Asia-Pacific power."³ It is interesting to note that the term "Indo-Pacific" has been replaced by "Asia-Pacific" in the official US narrative.

¹ "Democratic Party", *Democrats*, <https://democrats.org/who-we-are/our-history/> (accessed September 20, 2020).

² Kashish Parpiani, "The Biden Worldview and Its Implications for India", *Observer Research foundation (ORF)*, September 8, 2020.

³ John Glenn, "6 Foreign Policy Takeaways from the 2020 Democratic Party Platform", *USGLC*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-07-21-DRAFT-Democratic-Party-Platform.pdf> (accessed September 20, 2020).

- Pakistan's Position. The “2020 Democratic Party Platform” document does not mention Pakistan even once, unlike the “2016 Democratic Party Platform” which talked about Pakistan, i.e. we “will help Pakistan stabilize its polity and build an effective relationship with the predominantly young population of this strategically located, nuclear-armed country...[and] press both Afghanistan and Pakistan to deny terrorists sanctuary on either side of the border.”⁴ Comparing 2016 to 2020 documents of Democratic Party, Pakistan has been de-hyphenated from Afghanistan and one does not see any harsh reference to Pakistan in the latest one. Keeping track of Biden's Afghanistan approach, he will also continue with the existing peace process and withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Resultantly, his administration will remain engaged with Pakistan. Biden already knows Pakistan well and has visited it several times. In 2008, Biden was awarded with the Hilal-e-Pakistan for his role in signing of the Kerry-Lugar Bill. Biden knows the importance of Pakistan in the region for the US interests. When former Afghanistan President Karzai had asked Vice President Biden to fix Pakistan for removing terrorists' sanctuaries, he had retorted: “Mr. President, Pakistan is fifty times more important than Afghanistan for the US.”⁵ Nonetheless, there is another side of Biden, being sensitive to Pakistan's status as a nuclear armed country. Speaking to the *CNN* in 2010, he had said, “I think [Pakistan is] a big country that has nuclear weapons that are able to be deployed. It has a real significant minority of radicalised population...[and it is not] a completely functional democracy in the sense...and that is my greatest concern.”⁶
- Nuclear, Terrorism and Climate Issues. Biden stands for restoring American role in the world politics by taking along key allies in overcoming world challenges, i.e., nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and climate change. This is where Pakistan's needs to concentrate as its nuclear programme and terrorism-related stuff might find mentions during Biden's term intermittently. Pakistan needs to engage with the American interlocutors more vehemently on all these issues. Foreign Office must also make liaison with Ali Zaidi, a Pakistani American, who has been appointed as an advisor on the climate team with John Kerry and apprise him of PM Imran Khan's vision and focus on climate change.
- VP's Indian Heritage. Kamala has a mixed Indian-African heritage giving credence to suspicions that she might have a soft corner for India. However, this may be too early to predict as she will have to display an impartial demeanor as the Vice President of the US. She has “a reputation for toughness as she prosecuted cases of violence, drug trafficking, and sexual abuse...protection of women's reproductive rights, and social-justice following the May 2020 death of George Floyd.”⁷ So, she might be concerned about not only Pakistan's Achilles' heel, i.e. child abuse, women abuse/rights, social justice, equality before law, and governance could be areas of her concern yet would be hard for her to ignore HR violations in Kashmir and India.
- US-India. Clearly under Biden's watch, India will continue to be the preferred partner in South Asia and beyond over Pakistan and one will see more engagement in defence sector between the two. Nonetheless, differences on trade-related issues will continue between the US and India. Previously, Biden as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had piloted the passage of the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008 and co-sponsored the

⁴ “Democratic Party”.

⁵ Mark Mazzetti, “The Devastating Paradox of Pakistan”, *The Atlantic*, March 2018.

⁶ Washington, “Pakistan is My Greatest Concern: Biden”, *Deccan Herald*, February 12, 2010.

⁷ Gregory Lewis McNamee, “Biography: Kamala Harris”, *Britannica*, August 12, 2020.

legislation (Naval Vessels Transfer Act of 2005), which led to India's acquisition of the first US-built warship.⁸ The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), concluded during Trump Administration, will not be reversed by Biden either. Moreover, as a matter of state policy, the Biden Administration will also be supporting India's claim for the permanent seat of the UN Security Council.

Recommendations

- Re-engage. Keeping in view the Democratic President in Oval Office, Pakistan should demonstrate incremental progress in areas of national importance, i.e. especially HR, governance, participatory democracy, education, economic stability, environment and debt retirement.
- Diversify. Pakistan should diversify relations with the US. They should not be a security centric only, and should include economic partnership instead of aid as a central plank.
- Tit-for-tat. The US often cited "Congress' pressure" and "tax payers' money" as excuses when it did not want to accommodate Pakistan. Pakistan should also use its Parliament and public opinion while dealing with the US on any difficult issue(s), like it did during Salala episode.
- Encourage Investments. Pakistan should not vie for the resumption of the US aid. Rather, it should invite US support for debt relief coupled with more US investments in agriculture, education, and hi tech. Investments should also be invited in special economic zones (SEZs).
- FATF. Pakistan should not only make more efforts in meeting the FATF conditionalities but also seek US support in getting out of FATF grey listing.
- Afghanistan. Pakistan should continue with its policy of being the honest broker in the Afghan peace talks. Most importantly, the Biden administration should be asked to remain engaged in the post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan and Pakistan should be made a partner in this process.
- Indo-Pacific: The tug-of-war between the US and China is likely to continue in the Indo-Pacific. This will be a litmus test for Pakistan's diplomacy. Pakistan should try not to be seen as a party and rather make efforts in bringing both states together, like it did during early 1970s. Pakistan cannot afford to be on the wrong side of the US, but at the same time cannot forego its strategic partnership with China.

⁸ Kashish Parpiani, "The Biden Worldview."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Mr. Khalid H. Chandio has been working as Research Fellow (RF) at Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI). Before joining IPRI, he worked in different capacities, i.e. Media Analyst and Junior Analyst in the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Pakistan, which gave him practical insight in the research and analysis. Khalid has over a decade experience in “Research and Analysis”, “Coordination”, and “Strategic Messaging & Outreach”. He is a Near East South Asia-NESA ALUMNUS from Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University (NDU), Washington, D.C., USA. He has extensively travelled and participated in roundtables/closed moots, conferences/seminars, workshops and dialogues/plenaries in RUSI-United Kingdom (UK), Italy, China, Turkey, Jordan, Oman and Morocco. He has to his credit numerous published research papers, co-authored “Introduction” Book Chapters and book reviews. Khalid regularly contributes Op-eds/articles on current strategic issues in English dailies/online source of Pakistan/abroad.

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