

Signs of a geopolitical whirlwind: US-Pakistan ties and what it means for India

With a New Year tweet from his handle accusing Pakistan of “lies & deceit” in return for “33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years”, U.S. President Donald Trump ‘appears’ to be radically resetting his administration’s Pakistan policy, with implications for the rest of South Asia. To be sure, this is unlikely to have the gravity or determination of the post-9/11 threat from the American administration which at the time made it clear to Pakistan that if it didn’t cooperate with the U.S. in the war on terror, it would bomb Pakistan “back to the stone age”. The threat did work for some time.

A less worrisome interpretation of Mr. Trump’s outrage would be that it is a clever ploy to gain more leverage in a region where the U.S. is seemingly losing ground. It is steadily losing its Afghan war, losing ground to China in the region, and China is increasingly interested in politically managing the potential outcomes of the Afghan war. And Islamabad so far is seen to have had the best of both worlds — being China’s closest ally, while remaining a non-NATO ally of the U.S. In that interpretation, Mr. Trump decided to end the party for Pakistan on January 1, till of course Pakistan agrees to deliver on American concerns regarding China and Afghanistan. Yet, another way of reading this would be that it’s an empty threat on which Mr. Trump’s officials will eventually soft-pedal.

So how is Islamabad likely to deal with an apparently belligerent Trump administration? Will it fall in line or decline to act against the Taliban and the Haqqani network, widely considered to be Pakistan’s proxies in Afghanistan? Any tightening of the noose around the Taliban is likely to be viewed by the Pakistan army as a strategic blunder, the implications of which would outlast the irresolute U.S. commitment in Afghanistan. So the reasoning likely to be, why not wait out Mr. Trump’s occasional rage?

The U.S. may also have ill-timed its outrage. Caving into U.S. demands would have grave implications for the much-weakened civilian government in Islamabad, especially when all eyes are on the general elections later this year. The government, then, is likely to brave Mr. Trump’s wrath, or smooth-talk its way out. The response from Islamabad has so far been verbal, with threats of suspending military and intelligence cooperation with Washington. However, it should be noted that American aid and reimbursements (for expenses incurred by Pakistan in the war on terror) have been declining over the past several years. If so, the impact of the U.S. withholding aid may not be exceptionally damaging for Pakistan. That said, it would be instructive to watch what role Beijing would play in this war of nerves between its strategic adversary and closest ally.

Notwithstanding how Pakistan responds to the U.S., the latter’s strong-arm policies have implications for South Asia. For one, this would considerably diminish Pakistan’s ability to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds: being China’s closest strategic partner while remaining a key U.S. ally in the region even as China and the U.S. inch towards a Cold War of sorts. Pakistan has been steadily moving towards China from the American camp: this will now be a far quicker shift.

Second, as a direct consequence of these moves and counter-moves, there would emerge a far severe geopolitical competition in the region, the sharpest since the end of the Cold War. Southern Asia’s regional geopolitics would be reshaped along several disconcerting fault-lines. The emerging China-Pakistan-Russia axis is set to play a dominant role in the regional geopolitical order. All three members of this axis have scores to settle with the U.S. The role of Iran — which also has hostile relations with the U.S. even as it maintains a crucial strategic partnership with New Delhi — in this grouping would be interesting to watch. And what would it mean for India-Russia relations? Is it the beginning of the end of the special relationship between the two countries, signs of which are already apparent? Moreover, the closer India gets to the U.S., the

more each of these countries would display their discomfort towards India.

The emerging counter-pole is to be led by the U.S., with India and Japan on board, and the increasingly cautious Western powers taking a rather subdued interest. However, given the rise of China and the retreat of the U.S., current American allies are likely to hedge their bets. The one U.S. ally that has immense influence in Pakistan is Saudi Arabia with which India also maintains a close relationship. The question then is two-fold: Will the Americans choose to use Riyadh to put pressure on Islamabad, and will the Saudis want to do that at a time when China-Saudi relations are on the uptick? Many of these compelling scenarios will play out in various ways in the days ahead.

Implications of the U.S.-Pakistan rift may not be as straightforward as they might seem. Even though the American rhetoric against Pakistan is viewed highly favourably in India, the freezing of U.S.-Pakistan relations could potentially have negative implications for the country, certainly in the medium to long term. For one, this will mean the end of the indirect influence (through the U.S.) that India has traditionally managed to exert on Pakistan, especially on terror-related issues. Second, the ever-strong China-Pakistan ties, without the balancing effect of the U.S. in the region, could push India further to the wall. Finally, what happens should there be an India-Pakistan crisis like the Kargil conflict of 1999? For one, American 'absence' would embolden Chinese manoeuvres against India, and more so, China will be a far less pro-India broker than Washington ever was.

Reluctant India will be prodded to make a choice: either to remain unallied and safeguard its strategic autonomy or walk with the U.S. While New Delhi's best bet would be to deal with Washington without closing its doors to Moscow or Beijing, such fine balancing would require a great deal of diplomatic acumen, strategic foresight and long-term thinking. Moreover, choosing sides while physically located in the middle of a geopolitical whirlwind is no easy task. Such a crucial choice needs to factor in economic relations, defence partnerships, and most of all geographic realities.

In any case, New Delhi should also closely consider the real intent behind Washington's ire at Islamabad: it's the Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani network the Americans are after, not so much India-centric terror groups. When put under intense international pressure and American ire, Pakistan has managed to weather the storm in the past. Whether it will be able to do so this time is anyone's guess. But one thing is clear; if Pakistan can deliver on these fronts, its relations with the U.S. will improve. It is also important to note that even though the relations between the two countries were deteriorating in the recent past, the out-of-the-blue statements from Mr. Trump may not be adequately thought-out; hence the possibility that the U.S. establishment, with long-term interests in Pakistan, might soft-peddle its President's angry outbursts. Put differently, New Delhi should view it as a clash between Pakistani and American geopolitical interests, and not get involved itself. To its credit, then, the response from New Delhi has been guided by 'cautious optimism'.

A sharper geopolitical competition in the region could also adversely impact the overall sub-systemic stability in the region: when hard-nosed geopolitics takes over, focus on infrastructure development, market access, development of regional organisations, and regional conflict resolution mechanisms is bound to suffer. And that's precisely what India needs to carefully consider; for unlike both China and the U.S., India is deeply invested in stability in South Asia.

Happymon Jacob is Associate Professor of Disarmament Studies, Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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