

Like Cold War

US President Donald Trump's challenge to a "double-dealing" Pakistan has provoked commentators in the country to invoke the threat of a Cold War-like confrontation between America and China - with Pakistan safely operating on the Chinese side while India draws closer to the US. But Pakistan needs to be realistic. The 2008 Mumbai attack issue is still not resolved and Pakistan continues to prevent the UN from subjecting its main accused, Hafiz Saeed, to trial. China, which supports the UN call to apprehend Saeed, has repeated its charge in a veiled manner at the recent meeting of BRICS countries - a group that includes India - in Xiamen. Beijing has since tried to defend Pakistan against the charge of "safe havens" of terror on its soil.

The media in Pakistan has gone berserk and is cursing the country's PML(N) government for not responding "in kind" to Trump's threats while thanking China for standing up for Pakistan. After Trump encouraged India to raise its stakes in Afghanistan and up the ante against Pakistan, TV anchors in Pakistan invoked the familiar "two-nation" nationalism and asked people in the country to rise and confront the "cowardly" enemy. Used to Cold War bipolarity, it was easy for them to embrace the presumed US-versus-China square-off in South Asia, with India on the American side.

In some ways, Pakistan is preparing to sever its old association with the US and join the camp led by China in the new Cold War. The underlying reasons for the calls being made to bid goodbye to a "dying superpower" is the new equation America has found with India - the neighbour that shapes Pakistan's outlook on world politics. The madrasas and the religious parties are very clear about how Pakistan should disassociate with the US: Send the American ambassador packing and break diplomatic relations. The religious parties know that under Pakistan's new Afghan policy, they will play a central role while the political parties become marginal, once again. The politicians are going along with extremist anti-American slogans so as not to look irrelevant in the media.

Pakistan, like India, was once a British colony absorbing many humanist values that were alien to it from Britain. The English language is the civilisational vector that has set Pakistan apart from its neighbouring Muslim states like Iran and Afghanistan.

During the Cold War, the "ideological" Sparta of Pakistan incongruously sided with America while the Athens of India incongruously embraced the "ideological" Soviet Union. As Pakistan chafed under the value-laden "conditionalities" of the relationship, India kept its intellectual links with America intact while siding with the Soviet Union as a "Non-Aligned Nation".

As 70-year old Pakistan toughens ideologically, it feels like breaking-off the intellectual link with America where its gifted youth go for higher education and where resident Pakistanis are the seventh fastest-growing community. Pakistan has no intellectual connection with China, and language is a barrier, not a vector. India didn't suffer from the strategic disconnect of the Cold War. By aggressively disconnecting itself from America, Pakistan will not find a similar counterweight in China.

The Opposition in Pakistan pretends to be greatly worked up by "Trump's insult" and the country's leaders are heaping counter-insults on America, perhaps hoping that the PMLN government will be lured into issuing a stupid, warlike message to Washington. It was not the finest hour for Pakistan's semi-literate TV anchors, either, who actually encouraged the politicians to run-off at the mouth.

Will India take Trump's bait and step into Afghanistan? C. Raja Mohan has talked of the red line that India is likely to follow while engaging with Afghanistan: "India must ramp up its economic

diplomacy in Afghanistan to bring immediate benefits to Kabul amidst the deteriorating conditions in the country. Second, Delhi must step up security cooperation with Afghanistan, especially in the training of its police and armed forces and intelligence sharing. Third, on the diplomatic front, India must counter the emerging argument that Trump's new approach will intensify the Indo-Pak rivalry in Afghanistan and the old one that Kashmir holds the key to peace in Afghanistan" ('The Trump discontinuity', IE, August 24)

Pakistan can't get rid of its strategic depth doctrine when it comes to India. In the coming years, Indian projects in Afghanistan are likely to be targeted by Taliban while Pakistan will continue to issue tiresome denials about giving sanctuary to the outfit. India will likely go on unwisely squeezing Pakistan with mortar-fire on the country's eastern border and endangering China's projects in Pakistan through the Pakistani Taliban, hooked on bribes just like Afghan Taliban.

The new Cold War will shabbily proceed through non-state actors while nuclear weapons nestle dangerously in South Asian arsenals. It is almost certain that India will decide against deploying troops in Afghanistan to protect its projects being targeted by the Taliban and non-state actors. On the other hand, once Indian presence in Afghanistan becomes substantial, Pakistan will take recourse to reflex that its conditioned to: It will produce terrorists even in institutions of higher education.

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