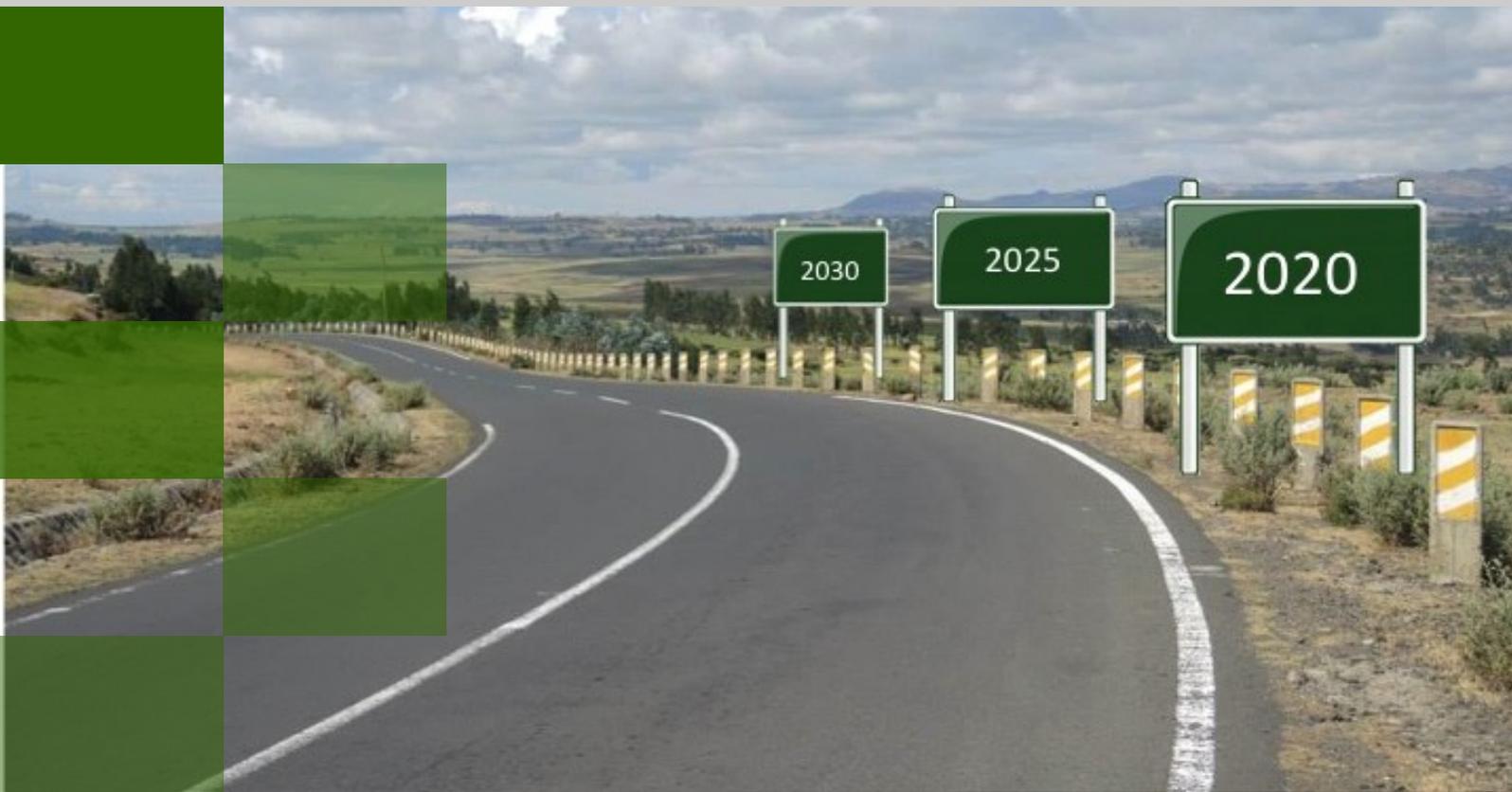


Trends. Threats. Projections

# US-Pak Relations:

What has Changed, What hasn't and What is unlikely to Change?

D. Suba Chandran



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# US-Pak Relations:

## What has Changed, What hasn't and What is unlikely to Change?

**D. Suba Chandran**

*Professor & Dean, NIAS*

**Following the Trump tweet threat on 01 January 2018, the US administration announced suspending the aid across-the-board.**

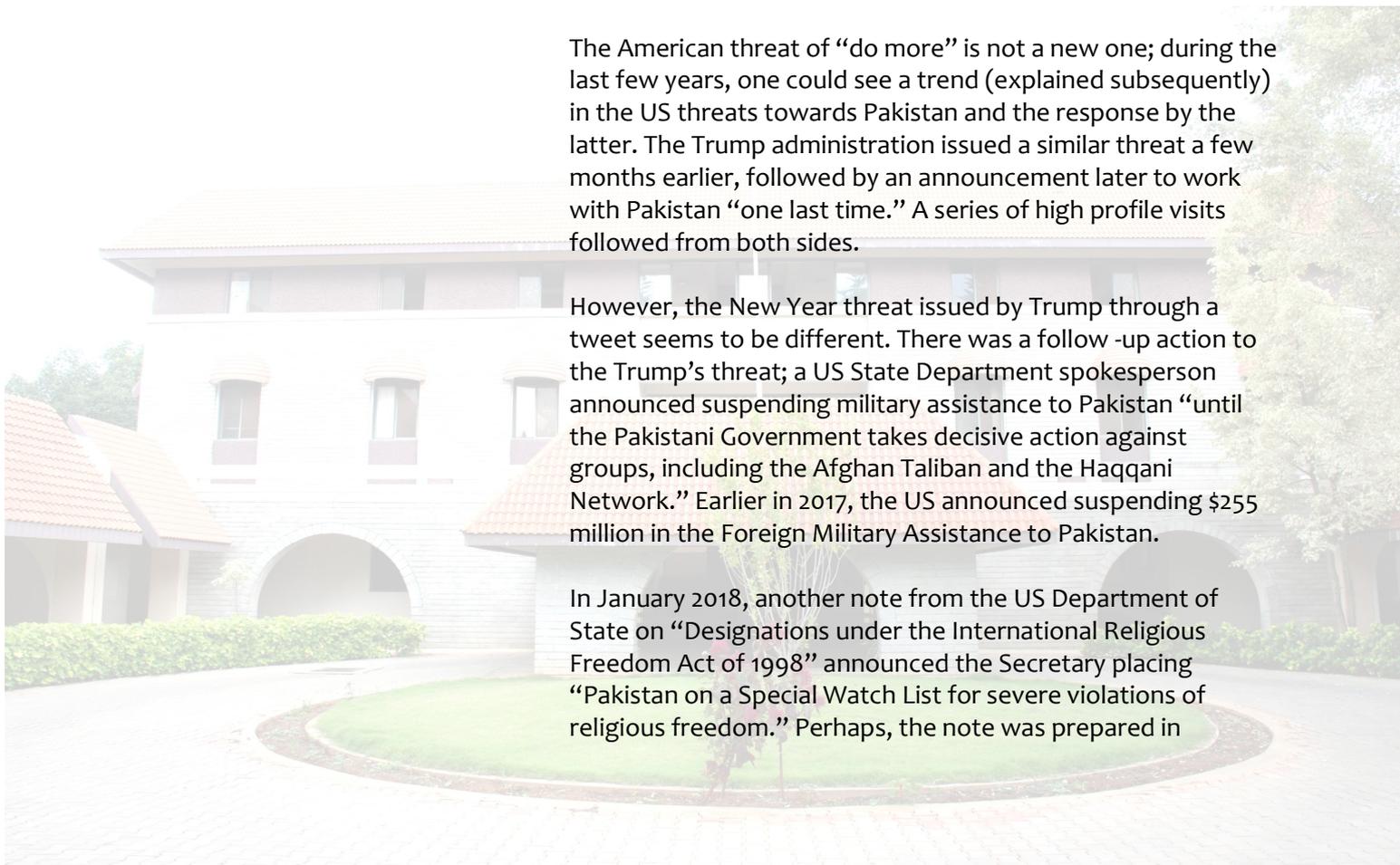
**How far will the US administration go this time in forcing Pakistan to do more? What has changed? And what has not? And what is not likely to?**

Trump's New Year tweet on 01 January 2018 was almost an ultimatum asking Pakistan to take certain actions towards Afghanistan and the militant groups in the Af-Pak region.

The American threat of "do more" is not a new one; during the last few years, one could see a trend (explained subsequently) in the US threats towards Pakistan and the response by the latter. The Trump administration issued a similar threat a few months earlier, followed by an announcement later to work with Pakistan "one last time." A series of high profile visits followed from both sides.

However, the New Year threat issued by Trump through a tweet seems to be different. There was a follow-up action to the Trump's threat; a US State Department spokesperson announced suspending military assistance to Pakistan "until the Pakistani Government takes decisive action against groups, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network." Earlier in 2017, the US announced suspending \$255 million in the Foreign Military Assistance to Pakistan.

In January 2018, another note from the US Department of State on "Designations under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998" announced the Secretary placing "Pakistan on a Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom." Perhaps, the note was prepared in



December 2017 as a part of its annual report with re-designating Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Pakistan could have been added to the list later to send a message. So Trump's New Year Pakistan tweet is not a hollow threat.

How far will the US administration go this time in forcing Pakistan to do more? What has changed in the recent months, especially after Trump becoming the President? And what has not? And what is unlikely to?

## I US-Pakistan Relations What has changed?

### A. Status Quo, Business as Usual & US-Pak Cyclic Relations

One could identify a cyclic pattern in the bilateral relations - the US demanding and issuing with "do more" threats followed by a few drone attacks, Pakistan taking a few actions on the ground or providing access to a few militant groups, a reduction in tensions between the two countries, and a high profile militant attack in Afghanistan upsetting the bilateral relations – leading to a new cycle of demands and actions.

Pakistan's policy makers have been engaging with the American threats – with seriousness at times and ignoring the same on most occasions. The US, despite its demands not getting addressed have returned in the past, willing to work with Pakistan. This has been the status quo of bilateral relations between the US and Pakistan since 2001.

Trump seems to be attempting to change the above, by applying pressure on Pakistan. For the US, the status quo is perhaps not acceptable. With Trump administration freezing the aid – the US seems to have conveyed a strong message to break the above cycle and tell Pakistan, business cannot go on as usual anymore.

*“The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools”*

*- Trump's Tweet, 01 Jan 2018*

### B. An American President willing to act on Pakistan and call off the bluff

Even the earlier American Presidents have made statements expressing their frustration on the status of US-Pak relations and the reluctance of the latter to cut off its support to the militant groups in the Af-Pak region. But they stopped with making threats of "do more". Obama did go ahead with a series of drone attacks in Pakistan territory, but limited the areas of operations primarily to the tribal agencies. Though Pakistan would complain about the US disregard for sovereignty, it did not rupture the bilateral relations. The only serious breach in the bilateral relations during Obama's Presidency was the American raid on Osama bin Laden.

Trump wants to raise the bar and lower the tolerance threshold in US-Pak relations. He made a serious statement in late 2017 on the issue; and then the tweet on January that said: “The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools.”

He followed it with a threat and an ultimatum: “They (Pakistan) give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more.” This President seems to be willing to pursue the options that the US have in materialising the threats. Freezing the aid is the first step.

The US Presidents always had options; the previous ones didn’t use it beyond a point. For example, the following political, economic and military options were always available for the American Presidents in executing the US threats vis-à-vis Pakistan: freezing the economic and military aid, increasing the drone attacks and expanding its geographic coverage within Pakistan, increasing the pressure on the Af-Pak border, politically pressurizing Pakistan with an intention to declare the latter a State that sponsors terrorism, formally reducing the political ties from a major Non-NATO ally status etc.

The Obama administration did occasionally pursue certain actions covering the above; besides the killing of Osama bin Laden, the Salala attack across the Af-Pak border, and an increased drone attacks but primarily concentrating on the FATA region except for an occasional attack on Balochistan.

However, Obama did not pursue the threats further. Perhaps, his administration was made to believe the Pakistani logic of “there is no other alternative” other than working with the latter.

Perhaps, Trump wants to call off this approach of “no other alternative” other than working with Pakistan. Perhaps, he does not want to ignore Pakistan’s support to the militant groups. He has been repeatedly telling and tweeting that it should stop. And immediately.

### **C. American Perceptions of Pakistan**

A major change in US-Pak relations in the recent years is related to the general American perception about Pakistan, which transcends the White House.

Until the last decade, Pakistan had influential backers in the Pentagon, US State Department, Think Tanks, media and the academic community. Today, there is a substantial change across the board in the US on how they perceive Pakistan. What Trump tweeted about Pakistan – lies and being deceitful, is shared by many in the US.

A section in the US also used to believe in the “TINA” factor – “there is no alternative” other than working with Pakistan. Nuclear weapons, the

*Until last decade, Pakistan had influential backers in the Pentagon, US State Department, Think Tanks and the academic community. Today, there is a substantial change across the board in the US about the American perception of Pakistan.*

threat of it falling into the wrong hands, radical groups taking over the State, strategic location – a combination of the above were used to justify the American reliance on Pakistan. Despite knowing about the “costs” of engaging Pakistan, the above was pushed as “benefits”. Islamabad and Rawalpindi were well aware of the above, and used it. Rather abused it.

This seems to have changed now. From the Pentagon to the media, there is a change across the board on how the Americans view Pakistan today. Many question the “strategic benefits” of working with Pakistan, and the utility of Islamabad in the future security calculations of US. Even those pro-Pakistan individuals and institutions, including the Pakistani diaspora in the US – seems to be cautious in projecting their discourse of working with Islamabad and be sensitive to Pakistan’s concerns.

Today, the “costs” of cooperation seems to outweigh the “benefits” of US overlooking Pakistan’s double game. The greatest change in the recent years in US-Pakistan relations has been this – the perceptions of common Americans and the strategic community in the US towards Pakistan.

#### **D. China, CPEC and Pakistan’s Confidence**

Pakistan also has changed now and is willing to look beyond the American aid. There is a new confidence, thanks to Pak-China relations and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The perceived political support from China, and the expectation that the CPEC will result in Islamabad reducing its dependence on the US has given a new foreign policy and economic outlook. Pakistan believes that China will come to its support at the global level politically, if the US decides to pursue a political action in isolating Pakistan. For example, if the US is likely to work through the UN in condemning Pakistan and its linkages with the terrorist groups, there is a predominant belief that China will come to its aid.

Second, the CPEC is seen as a huge economic opportunity. The argument is: if the US reduces its aid, there is no need to worry; this is based on the logic that the CPEC projects will sustain the investment scenario and also attract other countries to pitch in further. Besides the investments, the expectation is that the CPEC operationalization will make Pakistan a regional hub and increase Pakistan’s economic independence.

The above confidence makes a section in Pakistan to ignore the American threats. This section, wants Pakistan to take care of its own strategic interests and not be unduly worried about the American threats. If the Americans want to freeze their aid, so be it. The argument is – Pakistan is no more dependent on the American aid.

*Pakistan’s persistence in supporting the Haqqani network, and the domestic debate within Pakistan about the bilateral relations with the US – both has not changed.*

## II

### US-Pakistan Relations

#### What hasn't changed? And what is unlikely to change?

##### A. Pakistan's Afghan Policy

Over the last few decades, Pakistan's primary objective in Afghanistan has remained the same – to have a “friendly regime” in Kabul, if not a puppet one. Some will interpret the first one as the second.

Pakistan's strategies since the 1980s – supporting the Mujahideen, providing axis to the CIA against the Soviet troops, propping up the Taliban and sustaining it, reluctance to give up the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network, negating Indian influence in Afghanistan – all are aimed at achieving Pakistan's primary objective – a “friendly regime” in Kabul.

The above Pakistani pursuit in Afghanistan has not changed. And it is not likely to.

Despite domestic demands for a review of Pakistan's Afghan policy, it has remained the same. A friendly and pliable regime in Kabul has been and will be pursued as an unstated “existential problem” of Pakistan.

The reasons for this Afghan focus in Pakistan's foreign policy have been well known; it has a combination of domestic, cross-Durand and foreign policy fears. Referred to as the “Pashtun” factor in Af-Pak relations, Islamabad has been conscious of the larger Pashtun sentiment across the Durand Line. The fact that Afghanistan has not formally recognised the Durand Line further adds to Pakistan's Kabul concerns. In the recent years, India has increased its influence in Kabul; operationalization of Chabahar port in Iran and the proposed northern route will further reduce Afghan dependence on Pakistan.

The above plays a major role in US-Pak relations, as the former is less likely to appreciate the latter's concerns. There was a period after 2001, during which the US was hesitant to allow India to play a larger role in Afghanistan. Under Trump, this has changed substantially as one could see it in Trump's August speech on Afghanistan and the subsequent National Security Strategy of the US.

##### B. Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network

Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network is one of the primary strategies to achieve the above objective in Afghanistan. This has not changed. And it is unlikely to change, given the control of Pakistan's Deep State over Pakistan's Afghan policy.

Islamabad does have other options in Kabul, than pursuing a negative strategy through the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. No other country shares the strength that Islamabad possesses – number of

*For the American war machinery, Pakistan's geography is significant. It goes through the Karachi port and across Peshawar and Quetta. Once the war in Afghanistan is over, it has to return through the same way. This is not likely to change.*

Afghans grown up in Afghanistan since the 1980s and their cultural and economic roots east of the Durand Line. Another option is to cultivate Afghan leadership through long terms societal contacts instead of imposing them through a military and militant strategy.

Though, there have been few domestic inputs and internal voices about the need to reorient Pakistan's strategy towards Afghanistan concerning implementation, the approach remains the same. Pakistan has been reluctant to pursue alternative strategies in strengthening its influence in Afghanistan. Given the nature of Pakistan's foreign policy making process towards Afghanistan – led by the Deep State, this strategy is unlikely to change in the near future. This is also not likely to change, given who controls Pakistan's Afghan policy. (This aspect is discussed subsequently)

With the US willing to provide a larger space to India in Afghanistan, Pakistan is likely to vehemently guard its own space through its proxies – the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network. This is precisely what Trump underlined in his August 2017 speech: “Pakistan has also sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars at the same time they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change, and that will change immediately. No partnership can survive a country's harbouring of militants and terrorists who target U.S. service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and to peace.”

While Trump would want Pakistan to change its strategy towards the militant groups, Pakistan will see them as its trump card, and continue supporting them. This will increase American frustrations and exacerbate US-Pakistan relations further.

### **C. Domestic Rhetoric against the US and Anti-American Sentiments**

The domestic rhetoric about the US and the anti-American sentiments within Pakistan has not changed. From the State to the media, from the militant groups to the academic community – there a strong anti-American sentiment across the board in Pakistan. Since Trump, this has worsened further. The US is seen as an ungrateful ally and a “master” than a “friend”.

The American accusation on Pakistan not doing more in Afghanistan is projected as an excuse and a failure of the former in Kabul. One could repeatedly see the public rhetoric in Pakistan that the US demanding Islamabad to do more is to hide its own failure in Afghanistan.

The rhetoric against the US is not limited to an un-informed audience. From the Foreign minister of Pakistan to the rickshaw puller in Karachi – it is widespread. This has not changed and is unlikely to.

*Trump has closed the Iran option for the US in Afghanistan. Given the Russian sensitivities in Central Asian and US-Russia relations, the northern route will never become practical. As a result, Pakistan's geography is likely to remain a strategic tool for Islamabad.*

As a result, there is no “balanced voice” or an “internal critic” of US-Pakistan relations that would project an alternative discourse on the bilateral relations.

#### **D. Owing the War on Terrorism**

For long, a majority in Pakistan has been convinced that the War on terrorism is not theirs. The primary question, why should Islamabad support any military action against the militant groups – the al Qaeda or the Afghan Taliban, if the latter are not against Pakistan? A section would even support these groups and condemn Musharraf for colluding with the Americans in killing Osama bin Laden.

Despite high profile militant attacks that include the horrific ones in Peshawar and Lahore, the predominant perception is that the problem of terrorism in Pakistan will disappear once the American troops leave Afghanistan. Not many in Pakistan would agree that the problem is primarily due to Deep State’s engagement in proxy wars on both sides of the borders.

Pakistan has been projecting the blowback as a sacrifice, and has started to believe in it – creating and sustaining a new narrative within. Instead of owning the war on terrorism, Pakistan has externalised it and projected it as fighting someone else’s war and suffering for it. Repeatedly, one could see this narrative within Pakistan that also calls for severing ties with the US. An oft-repeated question has been: Why should Pakistan fight the American war in Afghanistan?

As a result of the above, there is no introspection about Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan during the last few decades. Is the problem in Af-Pak only a result of the CIA, and Pakistan is more a collateral? Latter seems to believe in the same. This perception is unlikely to change.

#### **E. Pakistan’s Geography**

For the American war machinery, Pakistan’s geography is significant. It goes through the Karachi port and across Peshawar and Quetta. Once the war in Afghanistan is over, it has to return through the same way. This is not likely to change.

Pakistan is well aware of the American reliance on Pakistan. Referred as the NATO supply route, it goes primarily through Pakistan’s ports and provinces. Pakistan provided the same support during the 1980s, and also since 2001.

The support is not only transit – but also capacity to reach Kabul. In the 1980s, the Deep State in Pakistan also provided contacts and information in Afghanistan to the CIA to wage the Cold War against the Soviet troops. Since 2001, the Deep State has been selectively providing

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information to neutralize al Qaeda and Taliban targets not only in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan.

The US has two options, but has been unwilling to look beyond Pakistan - Iran through Chahbahar and the northern route. During the last years of Obama's administration, the US administration was trying to reach out to Tehran. Geographically, Iran could be the much-needed option for the US to reach Afghanistan. Politically as well; Tehran has less ambition in Kabul than Islamabad. Though Iran has also hosted millions of Afghan refugees in its soil, it has not abused them as Pakistan has. Nor has Iran attempted to intervene in Afghanistan and use a group as its proxy, as Pakistan has been using the Haqqani network.

The northern route through Central Asia is a second option for the US. Though not as easy as the southern route through Iran and Chahbahar, it is still an option. Unfortunately, the American-Russian relation has never been strong enough to operationalize this route. Trump has closed the Iran option for the US in Afghanistan. Given the Russian sensitivities in Central Asian and US-Russia relations, the northern route will never become practical. As a result, Pakistan's geography is likely to remain a strategic tool for Islamabad.

## F. Deep State's hold over Foreign Policy

Pakistan's decision-making process on Afghanistan has always been with the Establishment than with the Parliament. It is likely to remain with the Deep State, than Pakistan's political leadership. This has been a problem in Pakistan reorienting its Afghan policy. And it will remain so.

Both the Parliament and Pakistan's External Ministry have been trying to take charge of the foreign policy, but in vain. Both the institutions would like to broaden the US-Pak relations, beyond military and security issues. Both the Institutions will require the American support to do it; a courageous attempt was made during Zardari's period through Hussain Huqqani, when the latter was the Ambassador to the US. Referred as the "memo gate" the attempt backfired badly for political leadership. The Deep State will never allow such initiatives that would reduce their influence over foreign policy – not only vis-à-vis the US, but also India, Afghanistan and now China as well.

The US will also have to share the blame for the above, as its policies required shortcuts instead of broadening the relationship. The US during the 1980s and during the last decade preferred to work with the military Establishment, paying lip service to democracy and institutions.

The more the Deep State wants to undermine the political leadership from playing a lead role in foreign policy decision-making, the more the distance will be between the US and Pakistan.

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### About the author

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*Views expressed are author's own*