



THE IMPLICATIONS OF TRUMP'S DEFEAT IN THE 2020 US ELECTIONS ON PAKISTAN

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Background

Under President Donald Trump, US foreign policy has changed dramatically in the past two years, including the United States' relations with Pakistan. As campaigns for the 2020 elections by Democratic candidates are already underway and the election of a US president other than Trump could have profound implications on US foreign policy, Wikistrat wanted to explore how US-Pakistan relations might change in the event that Trump is *not* reelected in 2020.

During October 2019, Wikistrat asked its Pakistan Experts' Community: **How will the relationship between Pakistan and the US look in the event that the next president of the US is not Donald Trump?** This special report presents the analysis of seven of Wikistrat's top experts on this question. Five experts presented their answers in a written form and two were interviewed.

Hussain Nadim, Head of the Nerve Center at Indus News Network:

There is a need first to recognize the US diplomatic relationship with Pakistan is unlike any other relationship it has with other countries. Pakistan is one of the key partners in the US War on Terror and it is also one of the key hurdles in the US War on Terror. Pakistan, therefore, presents a paradox to the US policy community.

Second, there is also a need to recognize that the US policy toward Pakistan is not driven by the White House but by the military and intelligence establishment in the US. This is partly because US-Pakistan relations historically have been military to military relations with very few civilian components to them.

With these two salient features of US-Pakistan relations under consideration, we can deduce that the exit of President Trump may not have such a severe impact on US-Pakistan relations given that the relations are being guided through institutions in the two countries. The relation is primarily interest-based, driven currently by the Afghan War and the centrality of Pakistan's role.

Therefore, whoever wins the US elections will have to rely on cordial relations with Pakistan to ensure the Afghan Peace Process.

Umair Jamal, Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand. A South Asian Voices Visiting Fellow at the Stimson Center in 2018:

Interestingly, President Trump's presidency has allowed Pakistan more space in the US's policy circles than expected. Trump's unconventional way of engaging with states and indifference for the nature of ties and preference on building personal ties to conduct diplomacy has given Pakistan plenty of space in Washington's policy circles. President Trump's connection with PM Khan has virtually isolated bureaucracy on both sides. Moreover, Pakistan's attempt to win over Trump has worked: President Trump has mentioned or talked about meditating over the issue of Kashmir more than any other president in recent history. Additionally, Trump's intent to withdraw troops from Afghanistan has given Pakistan significant clout in the White House.

All of this may return to the traditional style if Trump loses the election. It's unclear whether the US will withdraw troops from Afghanistan if Trump is unable to make a deal. Moreover, no one knows how the next president and his team will determine Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Fundamentally, Pakistan and the US's ties are concerned with focused security cooperation. If one can take out the issue of Afghanistan from the relationship, there won't be much space for Pakistan in DC. For Islamabad, Trump's presidency is serving the country's interests beyond Afghanistan: Trump's request to Imran Khan for mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one indication of both leader's relationships. Moreover, a mere discussion of Pakistan's role as a mediator will earn Islamabad credible neutrality between Riyadh and Tehran. Directly and indirectly, this shows that PM Khan has more affinity with the team in the White House than regular channels in the State Department and the Pentagon.

This may all change if another traditional president comes to the White House after the 2020 elections.

Subah Kapila, Ph.D. in Strategic Studies, Allahabad University:

The presidents of both Pakistan and the US are unpredictable entities who defy any predictable assessments as their actions do not always conform to geopolitical realities. Many scenarios arise because of the unpredictability factor.

One 'given' in this direction is that Pakistan is ripe for a political implosion that could throw out of gear even President Trump's own personal penchant for 'Deal Making'. The Pakistan Army does not trust the United States, less so after China has imposed a concubinage relationship on Pakistan.

If the USA votes in a Democrat as president, the picture could change considerably, going by historical precedents.

More importantly, US Presidential Elections now need to factor in the four million-strong Indian-American voters who will have a bearing on US policies toward Pakistan.

Kiran Khan, Research Officer at Dartways:

Pakistan's close and turbulent relationship with the United States of America is not unknown to its leadership and policymakers. There has been a significant improvement in the relationship recently, but it is still very unpredictable due to the current regime in the United States. I believe there will be a few initial hiccups if President Trump is not reelected in the US 2020 elections but, after a transition period, things will again move toward normalcy.

The US has deep and strategic interests, and it will continue to engage Pakistan in different ways. Pakistan has been working closely with the US on facilitating direct talks with the Afghan Taliban. The process and transition will continue even if Donald Trump is not reelected. At the same time, Pakistan may have to face a difficult situation due to the United States' emerging global rivalry with China. The growing economic and military ties of the United States with India can also irk Pakistan, with tensions escalating at the eastern border due to the unresolved dispute of Kashmir.

However, Pakistan can remain very vulnerable to the government change due to the economic/financial situation. Pakistan needs to focus on building a strategic relationship with the US that not only involves defense but should also incorporate the aspects of trade, investment, and other untapped economic opportunities. Also, Pakistan's improving relations with Russia, Iran, and Middle-Eastern countries can also bring more balance and strength in the country's position to negotiate and tackle challenges effectively.

Nadim Zafar, the News Bureau of a Fortune 500 Company:

A quick look at the history of US-PAK relations suggests that the relationships between the two countries were largely driven by the USA's strategic needs in the region. Be it the membership of SEATO and CENTO in the 50s, the war against the USSR in Afghanistan in the 80s, or the war on terror after 9/11, the USA's needs at the time dictated the nature of bilateral relations between Pakistan and the US.

The 2020 Presidential Elections in the US will be dominated by issues like climate change, healthcare, abortion, taxes, gun control, big tech, etc. The US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan will probably appear here and there in the foreign policy debates but, so far, there has been nothing to suggest that the country's policy will see a major shift with respect to its relationship with Pakistan if Democrats win. Yes, we may see a consistency of expression, and the loud and angry tweets of President Trump (like the one from Jan. 1, 2018) may go away. But the overall policy will remain linked to the outcome of the Afghan situation. Joe Biden, Democratic presidential candidate, has cited the need to be clear-eyed about the country's limited enduring security interests in the region. Biden believes in ending the war responsibly by not allowing the remnants of al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan to reconstitute and so destroying the Islamic State presence in the region.

After the recent revocation of Article 370 by India, Pakistan is trying hard to get some sort of US involvement in the Kashmir issue. Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic presidential candidate for the US elections 2020, expressed concern about the situation in Kashmir and the ongoing communications blackout. With Democrats in power, we may see the USA getting more vocal with respect to the human rights situation in Kashmir. No new president in the US will get involved in Kashmir at the cost of its relations with India.

Overall, US-PAK relations will continue to be driven by the USA's strategic needs and there will not be a major shift in the policy.

An interview with Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director of the Asia Program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center:

I think that a lot of it will depend on what the state of play is in Afghanistan at that point. There's this bipartisan tendency here in Washington to look at Pakistan through the lens of what's happening in Afghanistan. If, in November 2020, you still have efforts to pursue and conclude a peace process in Afghanistan, and Pakistan continues to be seen as significant in that endeavor, then I imagine that we'll basically be where we are today with the US-Pakistan relationship. The US will be trying to cooperate with the Pakistanis in order to get Pakistan's assistance in achieving US goals in Afghanistan. And the main consideration is what's going to be going on in Afghanistan. The state of play in Afghanistan will have a significant impact on US-Pakistan relations, and that's the case no matter who may be occupying the White House.

Beyond that, I think another factor here is the mistrust in the relationship that again transcends party lines in the United States. Both the Democrats and the Republicans have been very unhappy with Pakistan, believing that despite everything it said, it has not really taken the type of complete and irreversible steps against terrorist groups that threaten the United States in Afghanistan, as well as America's friends in Afghanistan and India. We don't know what's going to transpire between now and November 2020, but I think it's quite likely that, barring some type of major miracle, US foreign policy elite, so to speak, will continue to be very concerned that Pakistan is not doing enough to crack down on the types of terrorists that worry the United States.

I think that it's so hard to predict what's going on in Afghanistan. I do think that if you sort of try to game out possibilities as to what can happen in the next year, let's say that there is an effort to launch talks with the Taliban but it doesn't work or for whatever reason, it doesn't work out and Afghanistan is still at war and there's no hope of a resolution. Let's assume, and I think this is likely, that US troops have started leaving Afghanistan, even in the absence of a deal. I think, in that regard, if we assume that the US is essentially removing itself from Afghanistan, then I would think that come post-2020 elections in the United States, it doesn't matter who's going to be occupying the White House. I imagine there will not be all that much interest from the US side in making the US-Pakistan relationship work. And so that will, I think, have a negative implication for the relationship. Again, it doesn't matter who's occupying the White House.

An interview with James Schwemlein, Nonresident Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Former Senior Advisor to the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the US Department of State:

When I look ahead a year, which is what we're talking about, I think we're on a trend line that has a few features. The first is that it remains highly dependent on the US position and status in Afghanistan. If that country is unstable, Pakistan is one of the very few decent options for helping to manage it. Instability in Afghanistan seems the most likely outcome of all of this.

The second is India and strategic tensions with India. I think the routine series of crises that we've had between Pulwama and now the Article 370 decision in Kashmir have highlighted the need to, at least, have a little bit more of a coherent approach to discussing India and Pakistan's policy. [I think] that our relationships with India and the US's relationship with India will continue to be a downward force on relations with Pakistan.

The third is the Chinese and the Chinese relationship. This is a bipartisan, shared concern we have. There are acutely different approaches at this point on how to deal with these issues.

Under one policy, under the Trump administration policy, we take a very confrontational approach with third countries. This administration, for reasons that I don't really understand, tries to force choices on the part of our partners: You're either with us or against us.

I expect that virtually any US administration will break this style of approach, any other US administration would break this approach, and through a much more conciliatory position. That's, at least, my expectation. I think that opens opportunities for a place like Pakistan. I think the Chinese are doing some things there that they're doing elsewhere, but they're doing it larger in Pakistan, on the smart city stuff, for example. So, these are the three main factors from the US side.

On the Pakistani side, I also think there's a different context coming up that is important. What I heard in Pakistan, and keep hearing from Pakistani friends, is a real concern, especially highlighted after the Pulwama crisis in February.

I mean, that's the 370 Article and basically the lack of international attention to India's actions in Kashmir, and lack of Chinese reliability and its responses to Kashmir. On Pakistan's part, there is a desire to avoid dependency on China. That means the Pakistanis have an interest in investing again in a US relationship in a meaningful way. That would be a positive thing. To do that, any new administration has still got to focus on the same basic three things that we've always focused on in this region:

[Firstly,] Nuclear nonproliferation. Pakistan's a real concern here and needs to be.

[Secondly,] Terrorism continues to be a major concern. There are Financial Action Task Force meetings over the weekend in Paris. We're going to know a lot more then. I suspect they'll stay on the gray list if that's the way for the rest of the world to preserve leverage on them. The record still isn't good.

Finally, the state of Afghanistan and the future.

Those are the big factors to watch. I think it's more of a choice in terms of what happens in 2020. If there's a president and foreign policy that's pretty idiosyncratic and tonal in his tone of voice, and then there's a standard US foreign policy approach that is largely bipartisan still has been disrupted. On Pakistan, I don't see a lot of variability among [US presidential] candidates.

