

US Presidential Election: Impact on Pakistan and Way Forward

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Introduction

Having been in the closest engagements during major world crises, i.e. Cold War (against Communism), Afghanistan War (Soviet invasion 1979), and Post-9/11 (Global War on Terror-GWoT), bilateral relations between Pakistan and the United States (US) have always remained unequal. The on-again off-again trajectory has been the hallmark. The story of Pakistan-US relations has been both interesting and unique, i.e. interesting as both states enjoyed the closest of relations at one time and almost total disengagement afterwards; and unique as a power like the US always sought help from Pakistan, a third world country, in winning the world crises.

Lately, there has emerged a bipartisan (Democrats/Republicans) consensus on some issues, which can be termed constants, in the US over the years, i.e. (i) talking tough to Pakistan, (ii) wooing India, (iii) limiting/controlling Chinese rise, and (iv) getting rid of foreign liabilities/wars. Modus operandi can be different but both parties think same on these issues mainly.

Pakistan is probably the only country that has experienced being the most-allied status at one time and to utter negligence and even that of hostility afterwards. This is due to the fact that Pakistan-US relations mainly operated on crises and could not be built independently and bilaterally. When states interact in a particular crisis, they are bound to have loaded expectations from each other, which sometimes fall short and the blame game continues.

The US Presidential election is normally seen and observed enthusiastically throughout the world as America is still the sole super power, though struggling, having immense impact on global geo-politico-economics. Similar was the case with Pakistan watching and analysing the outcome of this election on November 3, 2020. It is important to note here that the US system of governance is based on “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” where President is one branch (Executive) along with Legislative (Congress) and Judicial. Major foreign policy decisions are not made in isolation, rather two branches, i.e. Congress and President mainly take the decisions in combination. This policy brief analyses and forecasts any possible impact(s) on Pakistan-US relations (under Biden), coupled with some major conclusions and way forward.

Analysis

US Presidential Election (2020) – Impact on Pakistan

It was difficult and uncertain to precisely predict who was going to win the election. But, lately the following different factors played important role in the outcome of the US election.

As per the “Fourteen Year Rule”, discovered by John McConnel, the then speech writer of George W. Bush, predicted that Presidential candidates had roughly 14 years from their first election as governor, member of House, or senator to be elected President. For most part, this rule holds true in the US history. Biden remained Senator for 36 years and no one who held Senatorship for 15 years or above had ever gone to become the US President.

After a careful look at the last few but recent elections, voters have elected fresh and less politically experienced Presidents, i.e. Clinton, Jr. Bush, Obama, and Trump. Fourteen Vice Presidents went on to become Presidents in the US and out of these nine became due to death,

assassination, and resignation of incumbent Presidents and out of remaining five only two became Presidents in the last 180 years, i.e. Nixon and Sr. Bush.

Another important factor is that during large scale crises, voters in the US have elected the incumbent Presidents, i.e. Abraham Lincoln during Civil War, Woodrow Wilson during WWI, F.D. Roosevelt during Great Depression and WWII, and Jr. Bush during GWoT. Incumbency factor also helped Presidents getting re-elected since 1932, except three Ford, Carter and Sr. Bush, all others till Obama got re-elected by Americans. Also, there seems to be a trend as the latest line of Presidents, i.e. Clinton, Jr. Bush, and Obama all secured second term. This time it is COVID-19. Will this world crisis also help incumbent Trump getting re-elected was a big question, keeping in view his handling of the issue. Though there was an economic recession in the US, but it was largely due to COVID-19, as economy was better before, and voters might have given benefit of doubt to Trump. Till April 2020, majority of Americans thought Trump will do better in economy, if re-elected.¹ However, if anything that made Trump fall in the election is his handling of COVID-19.

Previously, the slogan “Making America Great Again” won Trump the election as he was a fresh challenger. But, it did not serve him as a sitting President this time. Did Trump really make America great was again a million dollar question, keeping in view his policies both at domestic and international level. But at the same time, Trump was more likely to enjoy the support of the states, i.e. UAE, Bahrain and Sudan to recognize Israel.

Traditionally, the Republican Party’s support base is rural areas, men, the Silent generation, white Americans, and evangelical Christians, which became even more apparent when Trump won his last election. The Party is a bit conservative in its politics and approach. Both Trump and Pence have remained associated with reality TV and Radio programmes, which make them vocal and outspoken using lot of adjectives and superlatives, especially President Trump. He does not mean that in reality though. During first term, Trump altered the multilateral and domestic policies of Obama, i.e. exiting from Paris Climate Agreement, Iran Nuclear Deal, partially repealing Obama/Health Care Act, and ending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Biden is now up to reverse Trump’s policies and restore Obama’s since he was the Vice President at that time. The US politics has entered an era where reversing the policies of former President(s) may become the new norm.

If Trump had been re-elected, one might have seen a broader continuity of his policies, i.e. “America First”. His focus will have been on fixing the US economic problems. There was only one big foreign policy issue that Trump had been using during his election campaign and that was China. He was very direct while appealing to his support base, i.e. “if Biden wins, China wins”. Trump shall have followed status-quo policy to Pakistan but what affects China might affect Pakistan and the reasons are obvious, i.e. Pakistan-China friendship and Indo-China friction going to Indo-Pacific scheme of things. Also, with little to nearly absent tangible assistance from the US, the USAID to Pakistan would have continued to remain crippled under Trump. Overall, relationship between Pakistan and the US under Trump remained calm and stable unlike Obama’s tenure where drones, Salala, and OBL incidents took place. Trump spoke big and his focus often remained on NATO, EU, China, money, and trade, so, 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. But the fact is India will continue to be

¹ “TLDR News”, 2020, *TLDR*, UK.

preferred over Pakistan with more engagement in defence sector as trade issues shall continue between the two.

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”.² In October 2019, during House Foreign Affairs Committee, Democrats criticized Trump for setting a side American values for going softer on Indian HR violations with regard to Modi’s August 5 actions on Kashmir.³ Since confident Modi would continue to deal with iron hand with minorities, Biden may talk on the HR violations in Kashmir and India.

The “2020 Democratic Party Platform”, the only available latest and detailed document of the Democratic party, talks about India: “[We will] continue to invest in...strategic partnership with India—the world’s largest democracy, a nation of great diversity, and a growing Asia-Pacific power.”⁴ It is interesting that here the term “Asia-Pacific” is used while during his election campaign Biden used the newly-constructed term “Indo-Pacific” and will uphold this strategy. This means he would continue to have engagement with India. Also, Indians continue to convince Americans that stronger India is in the interest of the US. Biden was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the passage of the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008, and the co-sponsor of a legislation (Naval Vessels Transfer Act of 2005), which led to India’s acquisition of the first US-built warship.⁵

The 2020 document does not mention Pakistan even once, whereas the “2016 Democratic Party Platform” had 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”.⁶ Comparing 2016 to 2020 documents of Democratic Party, Pakistan has been de-hyphenated from Afghanistan and one doesn’t 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 troops pull out from the country. Resultantly, his administration will engage with Pakistan.

Biden knows Pakistan well and has visited several times. In 2015, Biden was “awarded with the Hilal-e-Pakistan...[and played significant role] in the signing of the Kerry-Lugar Bill 2009.” Biden knows the importance of Pakistan in the region for the US interests. When former Afghanistan President Karzai had asked Biden, the then Vice President, to fix Pakistan through more US pressure regarding terrorists’ sanctuaries, Biden had replied: “Mr. President, Pakistan is fifty times more important than Afghanistan for the US.”⁷ Nonetheless, there is another side of Biden. During his interview with *CNN* in 2010, he had talked tough: “I think [Pakistan is] a big country that has nuclear weapons that are able to be deployed. It has a real significant minority of

² “Democratic Party”, *Democrats*, <https://democrats.org/who-we-are/our-history/> (accessed September 20, 2020).

³ Kashish Parpiani, “The Biden worldview and its implications for India”, *Observer Research foundation* (ORF), September 8, 2020.

⁴ 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).

⁵ Kashish Parpiani, “The Biden worldview.”

⁶ “Democratic Party”, *Democrats*, <https://democrats.org/who-we-are/our-history/> (accessed September 20, 2020).

⁷ Mark Mazzetti, “The Devastating Paradox of Pakistan”, *The Atlantic*, March 2018.

radicalised population...[and it is not] a completely functional democracy in the sense...and that is my greatest concern.”⁸

Both Biden and Kamala are law graduates. This is one of the reasons they both talk about social justice and relief/aid programmes. The USAID shall be revived as per the “2020 Democratic Platform” document. Pakistan may get aid and more economic engagement. He stands for restoring American role in the world politics as a leader. He intends to take America’s key allies along in overcoming world challenges, i.e. nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and climate change. This is here Pakistan’s nuclear programme might find mentions during Biden’s term intermittently.

Kamala’s father is from Jamaica and her mother is a daughter of former Indian diplomat, which makes her both African-American and Indian in identity. There are some alarm bells within Pakistan’s strategic community that as a Vice President she might talk tough on Pakistan and be softer on India. However, this is too early to predict as she might not toe Indian narrative on Pakistan while sitting at one of the highest seats of the country. Since she has earned “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”,⁹ she might be concerned about Pakistan’s Achilles’ heel, i.e. child abuse, woman abuse and social justice.

Major Conclusions

- Based on above analyses, the empirical data and research suggested that there were chances of Trump getting re-elected, who would have continued to have a status-quo relationship with Pakistan. He got around 9 million more votes than his previous election.
- The prospects that the Pakistan-US relations under Biden may substantially improve hold little substance until and unless Pakistan does not have a clear agenda on what and how to talk to the US. The availability of the US money and resources will be much less.
- Pakistan-China strategic convergence in the region and Pakistan-Russia closeness would continue to irritate American policy makers even under Biden administration.
- Both the candidates see India as a strategic partner, while Pakistan as a tactical partner with transactional relationship. The recent visit of US Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Esper to New Delhi to participate in 2+2 meeting with their Indian counterparts and signing of Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) is a major step towards strategic partnership between the US and India, especially at a time when presidential elections are just one week away. It will give India access and expertise on geospatial intelligence, which will give more accuracy to forces when using weapons like cruise, ballistic missiles and drones. Moreover, as a matter of state policy the US supports India’s claim for the permanent seat of the UN Security Council. Therefore, both candidates are unlikely to change that stance.
- The US primacy in the global distribution of capabilities 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

⁸ Washington, “Pakistan is my greatest concern: Biden”, *Deccan Herald*, February 12, 2010.

⁹ Gregory Lewis McNamee, “Biography: Kamala Harris”, *Britannica*, August 12, 2020.

the US. This also led Pakistan-US relationship to unilateral advantage of the US most of the time.

- If one looks at the pages of history, there is hardly any substantial impact on American policy towards Pakistan after the US Presidential election, rather there was almost a complete embrace of the US policies by incumbent leadership/government in Pakistan.
- Once Afghanistan peace process is settled, 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 closeness.

Way Forward

- First thing first. Pakistan should harness its underutilized and unexplored state capabilities/national power potential and strengthen its narrative with incremental progress in areas of national importance, i.e. especially human rights, governance, participatory democracy, economic stability, and getting rid of debts/loans. Centering these aspects as focus of central attention can help create a new phase of holistic and multifaceted cooperation with the US.
- Pakistan must have a sound and consistent policy towards the US, no matter which government/leadership is in power in the US as well as in Pakistan. There must be some constants where all stakeholders in Pakistan have consensus while dealing with the US.
- Future engagement with the US must not possess secret aspects of bargain as this practice only added to anti-Pakistan and anti-US sentiments in both states and did not help in good relationship afterwards.
- Pakistan must be apprising the US in particular and the civilized world (West) in general that it was Pakistan who always stood with the US/West in world crises unlike India and suffered tremendously in terms of men and material. India always maintained a non-aligned posture and kept smooth trajectory in terms of economic and political development.