

Pakistan's future is tied to its balancing ties with the US and China

 southasiamonitor.org/spotlight/pakistans-future-tied-its-balancing-ties-us-and-china

If US-Pakistan ties were to deteriorate further, Islamabad has limited options since Beijing in recent months has clearly shown that it will assist Pakistan in dealing with its economic problems only up to a point.



By Tridivesh Singh Maini Feb 28, 2023

Image

Representational Photo

Days before US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to India and Central Asia, Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, stated that the US was concerned about Pakistan's debts vis a vis China. Said Lu: "Concerning Chinese loans to countries in India's immediate neighbourhood, we are deeply concerned that loans may be used for coercive leverage,"

The senior State Department official also stated that the US was in talks with India and other countries in the region regarding the issue of debts of certain South Asian nations – including Pakistan – to China. Blinken's India visit is scheduled from March 1-3, 2023 in connection with the G20 meeting of foreign ministers. Blinken will also meet with senior Indian officials and reaffirm their strong strategic relationship, according to the State Department.

Days before Lu made these comments, US State Department Counsellor in Pakistan, Derek Chollet, said: "We have been very clear about our concerns not just here in Pakistan, but elsewhere all around the world about Chinese debt, or debt owed to China."

Decline in Pakistan-US ties

Ties between the US and Pakistan had gone rock bottom after the ouster of Imran Khan from the position of Pakistan Prime Minister in April 2022. The PTI (Pakistan Tehreek E Insaaf) supremo clearly blamed the US for his ouster. Khan had said that he was punished for taking a neutral stance vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war. The former Pakistan PM had landed in Russia on February 24, 2022, the day the Russia-Ukraine war began.

While commenting on the US role in his removal, Khan said: "Clearly the US wants an obedient puppet as the prime minister who will not allow Pak choice of neutrality in a European war".

The current PDM (Pakistan Democratic Movement) alliance government led by Shehbaz Sharif, while seeking to strengthen ties with China, has also sought to put ties with the West, especially the US, back on track. Immediately after taking over as Prime Minister,

Shehbaz Sharif had said that his government would seek constructive engagement with the US. He even stated that Pakistan could play a positive role in reducing strains between China and the US as it had in the past. It is not just sections of the political class and the Pakistan military which were uncomfortable with Khan's anti-US stance, but also several commentators and analysts who believed that Pakistan could not afford the deterioration of ties with the US.

In recent months, Washington on its part has repeatedly stated that Pakistan is an important partner in South Asia, and it has assured Pakistan of support in dealing with its economic crisis. Pakistan on its part has thanked the US for the assistance it has received in dealing with floods (the US has provided assistance to the tune of \$97 million for flood response, disaster preparedness, and capacity building to Pakistan). Pakistan had also sought US assistance in urging the IMF to adopt less stringent conditionalities for the revival of the fund program.

Pakistan and US domestic politics

While Imran Khan, the main Pakistani opposition leader, has now toned down his anti-US rhetoric, stating that the US had no role in his ouster, Republican politician Nikki Haley, who recently announced her candidature for the US 2024 presidential election, in an article emphatically stated that the US will end assistance to all America's adversaries, including Pakistan and China, and in a tweet she also said that Pakistan was in the pocket of China.

The statement of Haley is important since the Biden Administration has sought to reduce strains with Pakistan, and while expressing concern over Pakistan's debts to China it has sought to de-hyphenate its bilateral relations with Islamabad from those with Beijing. Haley's statement suggests that if there is a change in guard, the approach vis-à-vis Pakistan could be similar to that of the Trump Administration. While former US President Donald Trump did keep a transactional relationship with Pakistan in the context of Afghan peace talks, he also withdrew military aid to Pakistan in January 2018. Trump, while commenting on the decision of his administration, in a tweet stated: "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 & deceit."

Pakistan would be closely watching US domestic politics because a tough US policy vis-à-vis Pakistan would add to the latter's challenges and reduce its options in dealing with its economic crisis. If US-Pakistan ties were to deteriorate further, Islamabad has limited options since Beijing in recent months has clearly shown that it will assist Pakistan in dealing with its economic problems only up to a point.

(The writer is a New Delhi-based policy analyst associated with The OP Jindal Global University, Sonapat, India. The views expressed are personal. He can be contacted at tsmaini@jgu.edu.in)

