The Complex matrix of Indo-Pak-US Relations
(Weekly Pulse)

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Renowned British historian Arnold Toynbee in a remarkable quote said, “The only thing we ever learn from history is that we never learn from history.” British and Soviets defeats in Afghanistan did not yield any right lessons for the US which postulated its success in the ‘Graveyard of Empires’. With no conceivable prospect of a conclusive victory in Afghanistan, amid receding strength and precarious economic condition, the US frustration is touching the threshold of making Pakistan a scapegoat in Afghan end game. Any miscalculation in this ‘game of chickens’ could take a confrontational course with disastrous regional and global consequences.

The US policy narrative on Af-Pak situation is marred with confusions and contradictions. Not going to an extreme extent of speculating that some invisible cult governs US foreign policy, but strong lobbies and pressure groups in US at times coerce the US policy makers to steer the foreign policy against their own national interest. More so, at times the US corporate industry, the US Department of Defence, the US Department of State and CIA interests doesn’t converge on a single agenda thus complicating and confusing the US policy on a particular issue. The Af-Pak issue is the case in point and as a result, Pak-US relations have come under immense stress where a sudden or a dramatic turn seems plausible. The US has changed its policy in Afghanistan from counter insurgency to counter terrorism due to heavy military, economic and political cost. However, it seeks from Pakistan to pursue hot pursuit operations both in tribal areas and mainland Pakistan against groups which have an anti-US posture, no matter what the political or economic cost maybe. All Pakistani efforts to convince the US policymakers of not pushing for a definitive timeline have gone in vain, putting the complete Pak-US relationship in jeopardy. The unstable economic situation in US suggests that Pakistan honeymoon time with US might be over.

Other than the Afghan issue, another major irritant in US-Pakistan strategic discourse is the divergence of perceptions on China and India. Few weeks back during an interactive secession at NDU, Thomas Lynch (who served as advisor to Admiral Mike Mullen) highlighted that Pakistan is not of much utility for the US in long term policy objectives until and unless it meets some of the pre-conditions. These pre-conditions set forth by him were, first, if Pakistan becomes a lucrative market for the US investors, second, if
Pakistan changes its policy of hostility towards India (by accepting status quo on Kashmir), third, if Pakistan accommodates US concerns on nuclear proliferation and fourth, if Pakistan follows continuous US advice on internal security operations. Pakistan must remain honest with the US by telling that some of these pre-conditions can’t be met without a tangible reciprocal gesture. Indo-Pak dialogue would remain stalled till the resolution of Kashmir issue and till now US has shown its complete apathy towards this outstanding issue. Similarly, most of the US concerns on Pakistan nuclear and internal security are based on unsubstantiated presumptions.

The rising tensions with the US over Af-Pak policy indicate that US might have strategically re-aligned itself in the region and now Pakistan is seen as a part of the problem rather than a non-NATO ally. The recent status acceded to India by US of ‘a dominant power in the region’ in “Containment of China” policy can not be de-associated with the latest salvo of accusations from Washington against Pakistan. Although it seems unlikely that the Indian political leadership would interested in confronting China at a huge economic cost only to appease Washington however, if it comes to taking on Pakistan, Indians would possibly adopt a different line until and unless Pakistan succumbs to Indian hegemonic posture which is very unlikely. Despite Pakistan taking numerous measures on major issues of concern within the framework of international security paradigm, has always fallen short of Washington and Indian expectations which expects Pakistan to become a party to US “Containment of China” policy. Therefore, Pakistan may not be of much utility for the US in the long term. If a relationship becomes cumbersome, divorce is a better option. Pakistan although has no desire to sever its ties with the US but the prognosis of this tense relationship seems to be heading towards a dead end. A direct Pak-US confrontation appears to be less plausible however, it can’t be completely ruled out amid US diplomatic brinkmanship.

In retrospect, Pakistan must take some concrete steps to negotiate with US from a position of strength. First, it should take the regional countries (like China, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) into confidence over the emerging threat. Second, Pakistan should immediately launch a diplomatic offensive mobilizing the European and Muslim countries reiterating that any confrontation between the US and Pakistan will have devastating consequences for South Asia, Middle East and global economy. Third, Pakistan should develop a criterion based relationship with the US rather than a relationship based on emotions, trust and friendship which caused repeated embarrassments. Fourth, India must be made clear that trying to squeeze any benefits from this scenario would strengthen the militant groups which could entail devastating consequences for Indian economy and peace in the region. And finally, US must unequivocally be intimated that Pakistan doesn’t want any direct confrontation however, if pushed to limits, Pakistan would exercise all available options to defend itself against any aggression. One could only hope that US prove Toynbee wrong of never learning from history. – Weekly Pulse.