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The Rise of Trump and Its Global Implications

Trump's Victory: Future of US-Pakistan Relations

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Pakistan features quite low on the US priority list. Under the Trump presidency, the low-key US-Pakistan relations are likely to continue. However, the security-centric ties will be trouble-prone and bumpy.

Commentary

BREXIT SHOOK Europe; Trump's victory has shocked the whole world. Perhaps the 11/9 shock is more baffling than the 9/11 attacks. Trump not only fooled the 24/7 US media pundits but also belied the pre-electoral projections which regarded Hillary Clinton as the favourite candidate.

After his victory, US friends and foes are equally worried about Trump's future course of action. During his election campaign, he had blown hot and cold against his allies and opponents alike. For instance, he praised the Russian President Putin, the US archrival, for fighting Islamic radicalism and criticised NATO, the US closest ally, as a redundant organisation that should be disbanded.

Response in Pakistan

In Pakistan, Trump's victory evoked mixed responses about the possible impact of his presidency on US.-Pakistan relations. Currently, Islamabad features quite low on Washington's priority list. What does Trump's victory mean for Pakistan?

Will the coldness in the Pakistan-US ties increase further or will it remain at its current level? More importantly, what are the benchmarks to evaluate Trump's future policies; his election campaign rhetoric or his prospective cabinet appointments and the inaugural speech he is going to make in January? Probably, both factors combined will shape his future policies.

In Washington, Trump is considered an outsider to the system. Foreign policy is not his strong area. His election agenda focused heavily on internal policies; therefore, his immediate focus will be domestic.

Political rhetoric is one thing, the reality of running the office is quite another. After briefings from the Pentagon, State Department, C.I.A. and other key institutions, Trump is likely to tone down his pre-electoral rhetoric. Notwithstanding his promises, in retrospect, President Obama could not shut down Guantanamo Bay detention camp or to withdraw the American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. It remains to be seen how much space the US system will afford Trump to translate his election agenda into policies.

Low-key US-Pakistan Relations Will Continue

Since 2011, Pakistan's importance as a key US ally has lessened following the killing of Al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad. One indicator of that is there has been no visit to the US by the former army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani in his second extension (2011-2013) and only one trip by the outgoing military chief General Raheel Shareef in 2015.

Notwithstanding Trump's victory, US-Pakistan ties are already very cold and cannot sink any lower. Washington and Islamabad do not look towards each other favourably. Pakistan has already bid farewell to the IMF programme this year. Since the onset of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Beijing has replaced Washington as Islamabad's major strategic, economic and diplomatic partner.

The US has already left Pakistan out of the Afghan peace process by "droning" the former Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in Balochistan and scuttling the Pakistan-initiated peace process in Afghanistan. The Coalition Support Funds (CSF), given for counter-terrorism cooperation since 9/11, have elapsed last year. The future military and economic aid to Pakistan has been slashed and made conditional to certification.

Transactional Ties

However, Pakistan will continue to be a distant US partner and a troubled ally. Under Trump, the framework of the US-Pakistan ties will remain transactional and security-centric. It will revolve around counter-terrorism, the peace process in Afghanistan and nuclear non-proliferation. The "do more" demands from the Trump-led White House and the Republican-dominated Congress will become a routine occurrence. Pentagon will have a greater say in determining the future US policies towards Pakistan.

Generally, the US will deal with India and Pakistan separately while formulating its policies for South Asia. Keeping the long-term US strategic interests in focus, India will feature quite high in the American priority list due to the commonality of goals and interests in defeating terrorism, containing China and enhancing economic ties. The US is already helping India become a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), supporting its stance on Kashmir and favouring the Indian bid to get permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Coming Challenges for Pakistan in Trump Era

The Trump administration will certainly turn the heat on Pakistan to expedite the slow-moving trial of the 2008 Mumbai attackers and take it to a logical conclusion. Similarly, the pressure to take action against the India-focused militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) will increase. Likewise, the demands to dismantle the Taliban sanctuaries on Pakistani soil will also escalate.

The immediate negative impact of Trump's policies on US-Pakistan relations will be indirect. For instance, his Middle East policy could result in a cut in remittances and rise in layoffs of Pakistani workers in the Gulf States. Similarly, his stringent visa policy towards the Muslim countries is likely to affect Pakistan as well. Moreover, if high tariff barriers are instituted it could negatively affect Pakistani exports to the US. Similarly, his policies towards migrant communities in the US might affect the Pakistani diaspora resulting in deportation or loss of jobs.

Way Forward

Presently, there is a bipartisan consensus in Washington on South Asia tilted in favour of India and keep separate and de-hyphenated engagement with Pakistan. Pakistan would do well to work with the US in areas where interests converge and have frank talks on issues of divergence instead of adopting duplicitous policies or making false promises.

Under President Trump, the low-key US-Pakistan relations are likely to continue without facing any immediate rupture or downgrading. However, the ties will remain trouble-prone and bumpy.

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