

End of the Forever War and US Strategy in South Asia

Monish Tourangbam

Summary

Following the withdrawal of the United States (US) from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover of the war-torn country, many questions are being posed on the future of American power and its image as a security guarantor. Like in the past, many have relished singing swan songs of American primacy in global affairs. However, as the US attempts to reorient its South Asia policy in the midst of a growing US-China great power competition in the larger Indo-Pacific region, it is imperative to make a sober assessment of how the US' approach to South Asia will pan out in the near future. More specifically, minus its large-scale involvement in Afghanistan, it will be important to analyse Washington's approach to working with New Delhi and Islamabad.

Given the historical antecedents of American retreat from and return to South Asian geopolitics, what does the current withdrawal and the US strategic compulsions in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China, portend for the stronger undercurrents as well as the more immediate features of US role in South Asia? Based on an understanding of the linkages between the withdrawal from Afghanistan and broader US foreign policy trends, the paper attempts to undertake an assessment of what could guide the shape of things to come, as far as Washington's engagement with New Delhi and Islamabad are concerned.

Introduction

For the last two decades, United States' (US) strategy in South Asia was overwhelmingly identified with its costly war on terror in Afghanistan. The 'Operation Enduring Freedom' to hunt those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, finally ended up in a campaign to oust the Taliban who were harbouring them. As President George W Bush asserted, "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."¹ With the Taliban leadership shifting base to Pakistan and the al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden untraceable until 2011 (when he was tracked down in Abbottabad and killed), Washington went into the business of erecting an interim administration in Kabul. The US military and civilian involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, in concert with partners and allies will largely define the contours of the US' strategy in South Asia for the next two decades. Amidst its foreign policy commitments in Afghanistan, the Bush administration also launched its misadventures in Iraq in 2003 that would not only divert resources from the Afghan theatre, but also led to the US being sucked into the Middle East quicksand, that diverted America's strategic attention from a rising China.

What came to be called the "forever war" became Washington's preoccupation at a time when Beijing was rapidly expanding its economic and diplomatic influence across the world

¹ "Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation", The White House, 11 September 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

and achieved potent military capability. The blooming strategic bonhomie between India and the US around this time was a product of the structural compulsions resulting from China's rise. On the other hand, a Pakistan that found its relevance largely dwindled in Washington's radar screens, emerged as a frontline ally of the US in the latter's war on terror in Afghanistan. Washington's relationship with New Delhi and Islamabad was broadly de-hyphenated.² Over the years, the US found it hard to ignore Pakistan's duplicitous game in fighting the war on terror, cherry picking which terrorist groups to target, whom to hand over to American authorities and which groups to shelter.³ Now, with the US withdrawal and what is worse, a complete Taliban takeover of Afghanistan becoming a reality, it is important to assess the emerging contours of US strategy in South Asia. Primarily, what will be the shape of things to come as far as US approach to Afghanistan is concerned? What will be the trajectory of India-US relations without Washington actively involved in Afghanistan? The Taliban triumph is being seen as a gain for Pakistan at least in the short term. How will these developments affect US-Pakistan relations? However, it is imperative to first assess the withdrawal from Afghanistan vis-à-vis the broader context of changing US foreign policy trends.

The Withdrawal and American Foreign Policy Trends

US President Joe Biden, after the fall of Kabul, remained steadfast on his decision to withdraw, contending that a delayed pull-out would have done nothing to make things better in Afghanistan. That the US was going to pull out from Afghanistan, was a foregone conclusion. When the Biden presidency took over, a withdrawal was imminent, but the manner in which it played out has certainly led to an unbridgeable security gap. The way in which the Kabul government and the US trained Afghan security collapsed has raised an avalanche of concerns and speculations. Biden rationalised his decision and sought to find succour in the argument that terrorist groups such as the al-Qaeda stand relatively decimated and that Afghanistan, in the near future, will not be used to launch attacks against the American homeland. Speaking about the end of the war in Afghanistan, Biden expressed surprise in the inability of the Afghan security forces to hold on as expected and in seeing President Ashraf Ghani flee his country. Yet, he firmly argued that his administration was ready for the exigency, which was "to safely extract Americans citizens before Aug. 31, as well as embassy personnel, allies and partners and those Afghans who had worked with us and fought alongside of us for 20 years."⁴

In Biden's mind, the rationale for pulling out of Afghanistan, despite all the criticism, seemed quite clear. The US succeeded in what it primarily set out to do in Afghanistan, with the killing of Bin Laden in 2011, but it stayed on for another decade and hence, it was time to end the war. Biden's promise to "restore America" was clearly predicated on revitalising

² Ashley J Tellis, "The Merits of Dehyphenation: Explaining U.S. Success in Engaging India and Pakistan", *The Washington Quarterly*, 31(4), 2010, pp. 21-42.

³ "Pakistan: Friend or Foe in the Fight against Terrorism?", Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, Trade and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 12 July 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20742/html/CHRG-114hhrg20742.htm>.

⁴ "Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan", The White House, 31 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

its economy for the benefit of the American “middle class”,⁵ and such a commitment did not sit well with continuing the costly war in Afghanistan. In foreign policy parlance, it meant making the controversial exit from the foreign war and putting American resources where it was required. Also at this point, nothing is more present and clearer a danger than the threat that China’s rise poses to America’s primacy in the international system. The primary thrust, as Biden contended, was to deal with the “threats of 2021 and tomorrow” and not the “threats of 2001”.⁶

The new focus on inter-state strategic competition and the threats from near peer competitors was made apparent in the *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy* and *National Military Strategy* of the Trump administration, which found broad continuity in the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* of the Biden administration.⁷ Biden’s *Interim Strategic Guidance* argued that the US “must also contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats” and named China, as rapidly becoming more assertive.⁸ The same document contended that “the United States should not, and will not, engage in ‘forever wars’ that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars”, and that the US “will work to responsibly end America’s longest war in Afghanistan while ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States.”⁹ Therefore, the strategic orientations of Biden’s America is very clear.

While the withdrawal conjures up images of retreating America, and raises questions over the future of its power, Biden’s America is not an isolationist America. Washington’s strategic designs are aimed at coming to terms with a strategic reality that stands at an inflection point.¹⁰ There is a weakening of the old order, but yet a lack of clarity of the emergence of a new one. During such a transitory era of global order, Washington intends to choose its fights wisely, and aims to double down on its alliances and like-minded partnerships to counter the destabilising impact of China’s rise. In the coming times, Washington will have to locate South Asia in its Indo-Pacific strategy. Given this new prism of US strategy, its ties with India feature most prominently in bilateral as well as multilateral ways.

⁵ Antony J Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People”, US Department of State, 3 March 2021. <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

⁶ “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan”, The White House.

⁷ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, The White House, December 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge”, US Department of Defense, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> and “Description of the National Military Strategy 2018”, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS 2018 National Military Strategy Description.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/UNCLASS%202018%20National%20Military%20Strategy%20Description.pdf).

⁸ “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, The White House, March 2021, pp. 7-8, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁰ Han Sung-Joo, Kirida Bhaopichitr and C Raja Mohan, “Asian Voices on the Future of U.S.-Asia Relations,” The Asia Foundation, 2021, <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/asian-voices-on-the-future-of-u-s-asia-relations/>.

US-India Partnership: Time to make it Truly Consequential

The US-India relationship has been billed consequential for global politics in the 21st century. However, despite structural compulsions driving the two democracies together against an autocratic China, divergences in threat perceptions and inherent foreign policy inertia on both sides, have not really made way for this rhetoric to become reality. More recently, the growing assertive turn in China's behaviour mainly evident through military adventurism in the Taiwan Straits, South China and East China Seas and the India-China border have raised tensions to a new height. In addition, the arrogant streak in Chinese diplomacy has made it clearer in New Delhi and Washington, the imperative for a new strategic signalling aimed at Beijing. Such a context has also reinvigorated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to find new gravitas. Last month, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bilateral meeting with President Biden as well as the first in-person Quad leaders' Summit highlighted the challenges of the Afghanistan scenario and dealing with the new rulers of Kabul. Nevertheless, managing the strategic ramifications of an assertive China remained the *sine qua non* of these meetings and the professed rationale for which Biden pulled out resources from Afghanistan to rather invest in the growing great power competition with China.

Given the long years of American influence on the geopolitics of South Asia, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan will lead to reimagining and reorienting of the pivot around which regional countries fashion their strategies.¹¹ Indeed, New Delhi's position on Kabul currently is not a desirable one. India had invested heavily in building a comprehensive relationship with the Afghan government in the last 20 years. Therefore, a complete and rapid fall of that political dispensation and the return of the Taliban was bound to throw New Delhi off balance.¹² In the current circumstances, Washington and New Delhi will find ways to coordinate strategies and approaches to the Afghan situation more broadly. During US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's visit to the Indian capital earlier this month, discussions revolved around growing security concerns in Afghanistan, more specifically on the role of the Haqqani network and Pakistan's deep hands in the whole potpourri of political actors involved there. Statements expressed a shared approach to Afghanistan, particularly in terms of not being in a hurry to give "recognition, let alone giving legitimacy" to the Taliban regime. The priority accorded to the upcoming US-India meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism Measures and Homeland Security Dialogue reflects the significance of counter-terrorism cooperation in bilateral relations.¹³ As far as Afghanistan is concerned, there will be a concerted diplomatic effort to open channels of communications with the Taliban with an intent to move the new leadership towards an inclusive

¹¹ C Raja Mohan, "What does US departure from Afghanistan mean for South Asia?", *The Indian Express*, 11 May 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pakistan-relations-us-in-middle-east-afghanistan-7309907/>.

¹² Stuti Bhatnagar, "Afghanistan's Collapse Shifts Strategic Dynamics in South Asia", *The Interpreter*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/afghanistan-s-collapse-shift-strategic-dynamics-south-asia>.

¹³ Nayanima Basu, "India raises concerns over Haqqanis, ISI in Afghanistan with visiting US Deputy Secy of State", *The Print*, 6 October 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-raises-concerns-over-haqqanis-isi-in-afghanistan-with-visiting-us-deputy-secy-of-state/746487/>.

government and society.¹⁴ More or less the same commitments came forward from the Quad leadership summit when it came to combating terrorism, and coordinating the Quad members' "diplomatic, economic, and human-rights policies towards Afghanistan" and deepening their "counter-terrorism and humanitarian cooperation".¹⁵

Nevertheless, the focus of the US-India partnership and that of the Quad grouping is largely premised on shaping the contours of a free, open, inclusive and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. As Sherman, during her India visit, emphatically contended, "We'll compete vigorously with China where we should, we will cooperate with China where it's in our interest to do so. I am sure the same is true for India."¹⁶ An outcome of the US-India strategic convergence over managing China's rise has been witnessed, more than any other domain, in the efforts to build a robust and comprehensive defence cooperation.¹⁷ Moreover, the Quad leaders in standing "for the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity of states" were, calling out China's assertive activities in the Indo-Pacific. South Asian countries in India's immediate neighbourhood, have become heavy recipients of Chinese investments, infrastructure building and financing, and are important nodes in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, one of the significant ways in which the US Indo-Pacific strategy could feature South Asian geopolitics and geo-economics post its Afghan withdrawal will be in creating convergence with India and other like-minded partners to ramp up regional infrastructure building and financing efforts, thus providing alternatives to Chinese designs in South Asia.¹⁸

While Washington and New Delhi will find ways of cooperating more intensely and broadly to manage Beijing's behaviour in the larger Indo-Pacific region, the US-Pakistan relationship is bound to pass through some choppy waters and an uncertain path. However, in the more circumscribed objective of preventing future terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan and developing what is being termed as "over the horizon capabilities",¹⁹ Washington might still find it difficult to completely untangle from its complex relationship with Islamabad. That the US military views the rapid fall of Kabul as unprecedented, which might still pose security threats to the American homeland, was made clear during a Senate hearing late last month, with top US military leaders.²⁰ One of the stronger statements coming out of the

¹⁴ "U.S.-India Joint Leaders' Statement: A Partnership for Global Good", The White House, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/u-s-india-joint-leaders-statement-a-partnership-for-global-good/>.

¹⁵ "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders", The White House, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>.

¹⁶ Geeta Mohan, "US and India 'like-minded', will challenge China when it undermines interests: US Dy Secretary of State", *India Today*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/usibc-india-ideas-summit-wendy-sherman-harsh-vardhan-shringla-china-afghanistan-indopacific-1861717-2021-10-07>.

¹⁷ "U.S.-India Joint Leaders' Statement: A Partnership for Global Good", The White House.

¹⁸ Mercy A Kuo, "US South Asia Policy: The Fallout from Afghanistan: Insights from Michael Kugelman", *The Diplomat*, 6 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/us-south-asia-policy-the-fallout-from-afghanistan/>; and "Joint Statement from Quad Leaders", The White House.

¹⁹ "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan", The White House, 16 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

²⁰ Barbara Sprunt, "Generals Say They Recommended Keeping U.S. Troops In Afghanistan", *NPR*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/28/1040877300/austin-milley-mckenzie-senate-hearing-afghanistan>.

hearing was that “a reconstituted Al-Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility, and those conditions to include activity in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months.”²¹ In recent years, the US-Pakistan relationship has largely revolved around each side trying to extract the best out of a highly transactional relationship premised on what Pakistan can do for America in Afghanistan and what America can offer in return.

The Future of US-Pakistan Ties: Uncertain Path

The uncertain path ahead for US-Pakistan ties was quite categorically captured when Sherman, while in India commented, “We (the US) don’t see ourselves building our broad relationship with Pakistan and we have no interest in returning to the days of a hyphenated India, Pakistan. That’s not where we are, that’s not where we are going to be.”²² During the 20 years of the war on terror in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s relationship with the US has come under much scrutiny. While Pakistan remained a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally of the US in Afghanistan, several instances raised questions over the sincerity with which Pakistan was fighting the war on terrorism. The most spectacular of these was America’s primary target, Bin Laden, being in Abbottabad, stone’s throw away from Pakistan’s military academy. A prevalent view regarding Pakistan has often been of an ally that is inevitable, but not necessarily desired. The Barack Obama administration in fact, after an assessment of the security environment, came to designate, a separate Afghanistan-Pakistan desk, with a Special Representative, calling it the epicentre of terrorism. The assessment not only saw the Pakistan military, and particularly its intelligence wing, Inter-Services Intelligence as tolerating the Taliban in Quetta, but also intently propping up the group, as a means to unsettle the Afghan government and prevent a stronger India-Afghanistan alignment. The bottom line was that America’s efforts to bring long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan were doomed to fail, unless its key ally, Pakistan stopped providing safe havens and other forms of assistance to the Taliban.²³

Just as Pakistan, during the Cold War, was roped in a transactional alliance to help the US fight communism in Asia, Pakistan, after becoming an ally of America’s war on terror, was expected to offer assistance in return for economic and military assistance flowing from the US. However, like during the Cold War, Pakistan, as an American ally in the war on terror, had its own axe to grind. Much of Pakistan’s strategy, whether it is playing ball with the Chinese while being allied with the US or sheltering the Taliban while on an official task to help the Americans fight them, has been premised on strengthening its position vis-à-vis India. Over the years, despite the power asymmetry between the US and Pakistan, the former’s ability to extract commitments and concessions from the latter, has always been

²¹ Eric Schmitt, “McKenzie suggests the U.S. may not be able to prevent Al Qaeda and ISIS from rebuilding in Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/us/politics/isis-al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>.

²² Nayanima Basu, “No interest in returning to days of a hyphenated India & Pakistan, US Deputy Secy of State says”, *The Print*, 7 October 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/no-interest-in-returning-to-days-of-a-hyphenated-india-pakistan-us-deputy-secy-of-state-says/747064/>.

²³ Barack Obama, *Promised Land* (United Kingdom: Vikings, 2020), pp. 320-21.

under suspect and a matter of debate rather than fact.²⁴ Whether during the Cold War alliance against Communism or the post 9/11 alliance against terrorism, the scorecard of US-Pakistan mutual expectations and outcomes has always been a chequered one.

While America expected Pakistan to do more in its fight against terrorism, Pakistan has constantly complained that the US did not appreciate its sacrifices and efforts in the global on terror. Moeed Yusuf, Pakistan's National Security Adviser, accused the now deposed US supported Afghan government of using Pakistan as a scapegoat to distract from its own inefficiencies. He called for the US to engage diplomatically with the Taliban and not to "isolate Afghanistan to punish its new rulers."²⁵ Yusuf also writing for the *Foreign Affairs*, earlier this month, emphatically argued,

"Apart from the Afghan people, Pakistan has been the greatest victim of the wars in Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion in 1979 and the subsequent U.S.-led military campaign after 9/11 were not of Pakistan's making. Yet our society, polity, and economy have borne the brunt of the conflict over the last four decades."²⁶

Putting the ball out of Pakistan's court, Yusuf contented that "Pakistan does not wield any extraordinary influence over the new rulers in Kabul, as both monetary assistance and legitimacy for the Taliban can come (or not) only from the world's major powers."²⁷ Raoof Hasan, a Special Assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan, writing for the *Pakistan Politico*, called Pakistan's involvement with the US "delusional" and contended that Pakistan had "perpetually suffered because of a relationship that was always bitten by an absence of trust."²⁸

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi echoed similar views on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting last month. He sounded buoyant about the prospects for peace and stability in a Taliban ruled Afghanistan and appeared optimistic commenting that the Taliban were listening and were "not insensitive to what is being said by neighbours and the international community."²⁹ Though, Washington seems in no rush to take Taliban on face value, it is pushing ahead a policy of engaging without any immediate plan for recognition. While in Pakistan, Sherman said, "We will not, however, judge the Taliban on their words, but on their actions. And so far, their actions have fallen

²⁴ Robert M Hathaway, *The Leverage Paradox: Pakistan and the United States* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2017).

²⁵ "'Treat Pakistan like an ally, not a scapegoat', NSA tells US", *The Express Tribune*, 10 October 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2317124/treat-pakistan-like-an-ally-not-a-scapegoat-nsa-tells-us>.

²⁶ Moeed Yusuf, "How Pakistan Sees Afghanistan: Peace Is Possible Only If the World Engages With the Taliban", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 October 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-10-07/how-pakistan-sees-afghanistan?utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20211009.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Raoof Hasan, "A Relationship that Was Not to Be", *Pakistan Politico*, 30 July 2021, <https://pakistanpolitico.com/pakus/>.

²⁹ Edith M Lederer, "The AP Interview: Don't isolate the Taliban, Pakistan urges", *AP News*, 24 September 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-united-nations-taliban-shah-mehmood-qureshi-258c17303271aa440cf60f5a9444e143>.

far short of those public commitments.”³⁰ The absence of trust between the two countries, however, is not likely to bring about a complete halt in the sort of security cooperation that Washington might still seek from Islamabad, and the diplomatic, economic and military support that Islamabad will desire from Washington despite the growing scope of Sino-Pakistan alliance.³¹ Pakistan will be likely to insert itself as a frontline state in America’s outreach to the Taliban and vice versa, for counter-terrorism support to the US in the form of intelligence sharing and overflight rights from Pakistan, and as a key correspondent of Taliban’s desire for international legitimacy and flow of external economic assistance.³² The Sino-Pakistan cooperation, dependent on how Beijing perceives the security situation in Afghanistan, has both opportunities and risks. The former coming from Chinese investments in infrastructure and connectivity as a part of its BRI ambitions, and the latter coming from the brewing cocktail of terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.³³

Conclusion

That the US was going to withdraw from Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion, as Obama entered the White House and initiated the surge and exit policy. Even as the Trump administration in its South Asia policy of 2017 called for a conditions and not timeline based strategy, the real goal was the withdrawal and in what way it was to be eventually executed. The dice was rolled with the 2020 peace deal between the US and the Taliban in Qatar. This was a sea change in who was in the driving seat of the negotiation for the future of Afghanistan. Dealing with the resurgent Taliban, the US had to make concessions and literally became the weaker party in the negotiation, despite its overwhelming national power. Therefore, despite some divergent opinions coming out from the US interagency policymaking process regarding the feasibility of a complete withdrawal, the incoming Biden administration had made its intent quite clear. The Biden team argued that America’s actions abroad should be premised on how it benefited the American people. Its purpose was to “restore” America for the American people, which in domestic policy meant revitalising its economy, and in foreign policy meant putting scarce resources to fight the biggest challenge to US primacy coming from China, not be bogged down further in the forever war.

However, the march of the Taliban to Kabul, the complete and rapid collapse of the Afghan security forces and an absconding Afghan President, created a confusing image of the limits of American power and strategy in South Asia, nay, in the world. As Washington attempts to read the known and unknowns of its South Asia policy, New Delhi and Islamabad will be connecting the dots of the contours of their relationships with Washington. As the Biden

³⁰ Kamran Yousaf, “Sherman hails ‘longstanding ties’ with Pakistan”, *The Express Tribune*, 9 October 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2323957/sherman-hails-longstanding-ties-with-pakistan>.

³¹ “Talks with Pakistan on counterterrorism measures to continue, says US’ Wendy Sherman,” *WION*, 9 October 2021, <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/talks-with-pakistan-on-counterterrorism-measures-to-continue-says-us-wendy-sherman-419349>.

³² Michael Kugelman, “Washington’s Divergent Diplomacy in South Asia”, *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/07/india-pakistan-wendy-sherman-visit-diplomacy-south-asia/>.

³³ Mercy A Kuo, “US South Asia Policy: The Fallout from Afghanistan: Insights from Michael Kugelman”, *The Diplomat*; and Nooman Merchant, “US, Pakistan face each other again on Afghanistan threats”, *AP News*, 25 September 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-islamabad-national-security-kabul-5e852add2a0b83a8c3c42462c89f2ff0>.

administration frames America's principle foreign policy challenges as coming from China and Russia and attempts to reorient US military, economic and diplomatic resources towards the Indo-Pacific theatre, how would South Asia feature in the scheme of things?

The US-India relationship in the near future is likely to remain multifaceted in its scope, with the strategic glue being the common threats perceived from an assertive China. Pertaining to Afghanistan, the US-India broader understanding as a part of their counter-terrorism cooperation will continue, without much significant shift. The question remains: what will be Pakistan's role as Washington attempts to clean up its dirty linen in Afghanistan, and prevent any future terrorist attacks originating from the badlands of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Will Pakistan find its place and role in whatever remains of the American involvement in Afghanistan using its geostrategic location and the history of its links to the Taliban? Will the US focus its attention and resources in volatile theatres of inter-state competition in the Indo-Pacific, and turn a relative blind eye to what Pakistan does in Afghanistan in cohort with America's adversaries like China and Russia? Such questions could be useful signposts in attempts to read the future of US strategy in South Asia in the aftermath of its withdrawal from the forever war in Afghanistan and in the midst of the changes and continuity in US domestic and foreign policy priorities.

.

Monish Tourangbam is a Strategic Analyst based in India and the Honorary Director of the Kalinga Institute of Indo-Pacific Studies, India. He can be contacted at monish53@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.