IDEAS • PAKISTAN

The U.S. Is Losing a Strategic, Nuclear-Armed Ally to China

Supporters of ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party burn a U.S. flag during an anti-U.S. protest in Peshawar on April 1, 2022. ABDUL MAJEED/AFP via Getty Images

IDEAS

BY HASAN ALI MAY 29, 2022 11:23 PM EDT

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In a rousing speech delivered on May 26, Pakistan's recently ousted Prime Minister, Imran Khan, gave the ruling coalition until June 1 to hold fresh elections, which were originally scheduled for October next year. Speaking after a night of political turmoil, when thousands of his supporters had laid siege to capital Islamabad, the cricket-star-turned-politician doubled down on his claim that he had been removed from office through a U.S.-funded plot. "Our people will not accept under any circumstances an imported government foisted upon us by an American conspiracy," he said.

Khan's anti-American pitch marks the lowest ebb in U.S. relations with a country that used to be one of Washington's strongest allies and a trusted Cold War partner. President Joe Biden concluded his first tour of Asia last week, with trips to Japan and South Korea to reinforce ties with old allies in the face of growing Chinese influence in the region—but with a former friend in another part of the continent, Washington has been steadily ceding ground to Beijing. Pakistan's newly appointed foreign minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, has already been touring China and calling it his "second home."

The decline of American influence in this South Asian country has been precipitated by the end of America's Afghanistan campaign, which has brought long-simmering tensions between the two countries to the surface, with each side holding the other responsible for its failure. Pakistan contends that it was coerced into joining the "war on terror," and accused former deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, of threatening to bomb the country "back to the stone age" if it refused to cooperate. (Armitage refuted the allegation.)

A supporter of ousted Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan flashes the victory sign as they march along a street during a demonstration in Islamabad on May 26, 2022. AAMIR QURESHI/AFP via Getty Images

As a result of its involvement, Pakistan says it has lost 70,000 lives, incurred economic losses in excess of $150 billion and made itself a target of violent extremism. The U.S., meanwhile, blames the Pakistan Army and the country's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for harboring Osama bin Laden in a safehouse in Abbottabad, and for secretly helping the Taliban take back control of Afghanistan.

Relations between the U.S. and Pakistan have ebbed and flowed since the 50s and early 60s, when Washington lavished Islamabad with millions of dollars in foreign aid as reward for joining its global campaign against communism, only to suspend the assistance as punishment for Islamabad's hobnobbing with Egypt and China in 1965. Relations improved again in the 1970s, when the Nixon and Ford administrations used Pakistan as a go-between to court China, before souring again under President Carter's administration, which cut off military aid to punish Pakistan for building a facility to enrich uranium.

With Pakistan becoming a front line state in Washington's campaign against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S.-Pakistan cooperation steadied again. But when that war ended in 1989, the U.S. sanctioned Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment for enriching uranium and hastily dialed down its engagement in the region. This firmly sowed the seeds of distrust between the two sides and led Pakistan to cultivate its relationship with China. As part of Washington's global "war on terror," Islamabad did, however, join the renewed U.S. campaign in Afghanistan post-9/11, this time against the Taliban—who took over after a protracted period of civil war following the Soviet withdrawal.

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But the years leading up to America's own withdrawal from Afghanistan last year have seen gradual distancing between the old allies, and Pakistan's decisive pivoting toward China. The U.S. has simultaneously tilted toward Pakistan's arch-enemy India, drawing it into regional coalitions against China, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, comprising the U.S. Australia, Japan and India. The economic engagement between India and the U.S. has also been increasing noticeably. India is one of the participating countries in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework—just announced by Biden—that is aimed at countering China's economic influence.

A supporter of Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan amid tear gas fired by police during a protest rally in Swabi on May 25. Abdul Majeed—AFP/Getty Images

China's unstoppable rise in Pakistan

On the other hand, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a $62 billion program of infrastructure that creates a trade and energy route between the Arabian Sea and China through Pakistan—has made China the linchpin of Pakistan's economic development. Pakistan's reliance on Chinese investment and its resentments against what it considers American duplicity, means that it now no longer matters who holds the reins of government in Islamabad. All major and minor political players are bound to prioritize Pakistan's relationship with China over that with the United States. The only difference is the degree to which they will antagonize the U.S. publicly.

The Pakistan Army, which was instrumental in bringing Khan to power and is still very much the power behind the throne, would like the civilian government to have cordial relations with the United States, if for no other reason than to protect the country's failing economy. Even as Khan leads the charge against the government and the U.S., Pakistan is negotiating an emergency assistance package with the International Monetary Fund, which will require Washington's buy-in.

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It is in this context that Khan's America bashing is seen as a problem. The top brass of the military understands that a victory for Khan in the next general election would come with an implied mandate of creating an even greater distance between Islamabad and Washington—something the country can ill afford.

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The present administration—a coalition led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif—appears committed to a policy of rapprochement with the United States and has already begun making overtures toward Washington. Foreign Minister Bhutto says the U.S. and Pakistan need "to engage in a far broader, deeper and more meaningful relationship."

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds talks with Pakistan's new foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in Guangzhou, China, May 22, 2022. Xinhua News Agency via Deng Hua/Xinhua via Getty Images

But China was also the first country that Bhutto visited after his appointment, in yet another clear indication of the evolving geopolitical priorities for Pakistan. "I am particularly proud that all three generations of my family are firmly committed to the Pakistan-China friendship," said the scion of the powerful Bhutto family on the trip. Pakistan, he added, is "heartened by China's great achievements and firmly believes that no force can stop China from forging ahead."

As far as Pakistan is concerned, the consensus across the political spectrum is that the future belongs to China, and with it, Pakistan's own future. No matter when the next election is held and who wins, America is clearly losing in Pakistan.

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