

## India Can Live with US-Pakistan Makeover

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*The US state department spokesman [Ned Price](#) has put **External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar** on the mat as regards the latter's [remarks](#) questioning the raison d'être of the US-Pakistan relationship.*

Yet, some national dailies have rushed to eagerly attribute it to the US displeasure over India's stance on the conflict in Ukraine. One daily rather churlishly advised the government, "As Delhi demonstrates "strategic autonomy" to engage with every side — Quad one week, and Russia and China the next at the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) in Samarkand — and work around Western sanctions to buy oil from Russia, and keep friends in all camps, it may have to come to terms that others in world play the same game."

In this unseemly hurry to link Ned's remarks with India's strategic autonomy, what these commentators overlook is that the US spokesman was speaking on a special day when the Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto was visiting the state department at the invitation of the Secretary of State Antony Blinken — and on top of it, the two countries were [commemorating the 75th anniversary](#) of the establishment of diplomatic relations.

Indeed, it is another matter that Jaishankar's remarks were not only unwarranted — casting aspersions on the US-Pakistan relationship — but untimely, and perhaps, even provocative. The only charitable explanation could be that Jaishankar was grandstanding as a consummate politician before an audience of Indian-Americans, with an eye on his "core constituency" in India. The mitigating factor of course is that he has only given back to the Americans in their own coin, who consider it their prerogative to butt into other countries' external relations with gratuitous comments — India's with Russia, for instance.

Ned Price's remarks have all the elements of a policy statement. He said: "We don't view our relationship with Pakistan, and ... our relationship with India as in relation to one another. These are both partners of ours with different points of emphasis in each. We look at both as partners, because we do have in many cases shared values. We do have in many

cases shared interests. And the relationship we have with India stands on its own. The relationship we have with Pakistan stands on its own. We also want to do everything we can to see to it that these neighbors have relations with one another that are as constructive as can be possible. And so that's another point of emphasis."

What stands out at the most obvious level is that Price reiterated the US policy in the recent decades since the Cold War ended to "de-hyphenate" Washington's relationships with India and Pakistan while also promoting a normal relationship between the two South Asian rivals who are not on talking terms. Price pointed out that the two relationships have "different points of emphasis in each."

Interestingly, Price equated India with Pakistan as partner countries with which the US has "in many cases shared values" and "in many cases shared interests." This needs to be understood properly. Washington has taken note of Pakistan's objection over the prioritisation of India in the US' regional policies in South Asia in the past.

This shift removes a major hurdle in the trajectory of US-Pakistan relationship and is necessitated by a variety of factors following the humiliating defeat that the US suffered in Afghanistan. Here, security considerations certainly constitute one key factor.

The killing of the al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri was only possible due to the help from Pakistan. Equally, Afghan situation remains dangerous and the US can not turn its back on what's happening out there. The US' dependence on Pakistani intelligence has only increased.

Both Jaishankar and our media have been off the mark in judging that the F-16 fighters are of no use in counter-terrorist operations. Actually, F-16 fighter jets have been for decades the work horses of Turkish military's operations against Kurdish terrorist groups. This is despite Turkey manufacturing advanced drones. The real question here is whether the Americans really think Pakistan is willing to do what Turkey does routinely in its neighbouring countries by sending the F-16 to bomb the terrorist bases.

Price also pointed out that the military balance in the South Asian region has not been affected due to the upgrade of the F-16 jets in the Pakistani inventory. To my mind, it is not for India to opine on what Pakistan's defence requirements ought to be. Do we allow Pakistan to have a say in the modernisation of our armed forces?

This is where Jaishankar literally flew off the handle. It is none of India's business to question the quotient of mutual benefit in the US-Pakistan relationship. It is a relationship that began a very long time ago, and it served the vital interests of the two countries. Remember how Kissinger took off from Pakistan on his [pathbreaking visit to China](#). For a year before that, the Nixon administration and China sent messages back and forth via Pakistan. Suffice to say, in one of the most poignant chapters of Cold War history where the Americans turned the table on the Soviets conclusively, it was Pakistan that the US would count on as its indispensable ally.

The revival of the US-Pakistani alliance should not annoy India. There is an inevitability about it, if the overthrow of Imran Khan and the regime change that followed in Pakistan is to be taken to its logical conclusion. The lovefest yesterday at the National Museum of American Diplomacy in the Harry S Truman Building in Washington was truly befitting. Bilawal Bhutto put it nicely when he said, "diplomacy is back both here at the State

Department – (*applause*) – and in the foreign ministry of Pakistan.”

Price’s remarks should be a reality check for those media analysts who wish that if only India rolls back its relationship with Russia and aligns with the US, goodies would follow. Life is real. Ask Turkey or Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Egypt what their experience has been as the allies of the US.

It is sheer naïveté to imagine that the US’ normalisation with Pakistan is simply a way of punishing India for its “lukewarm” attitude toward sanctions against Russia. Make no mistake, the revival of the US’ partnership with Pakistan is a long-term strategy necessitated by profound geopolitical compulsions — ranging from the Taliban rule to China’s towering presence in Pakistan, the BRI, US’ adversarial relationships with Russia and Iran, NATO’s progression toward the Indo-Pacific and so on — apart from the compelling reality that Pakistan is an important regional power and American strategies in the region cannot be optimal without Islamabad’s cooperation and partnership.

In the final analysis, the US acts only in its interests. Price admitted with candour that the US has “different points of interest each” in its relations with India and Pakistan. Plainly put, the US has different uses for Pakistan and India and they do not necessarily collide. That said, there must be some disappointment too that India is not performing optimally.

Look at how the US has led the European allies up the garden path as regards sanctions against Russia. In a speech in the Hungarian parliament on Monday, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said it is about time Europe discussed with Washington the removal of sanctions by the end of the year. By the way, Hungary is a NATO ally. Yet, Orbán accused American oil companies of “war profiteering.” Orbán now plans to hold a national referendum to ascertain whether his people want the sanctions to continue. Welcome to multipolarity.

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