**Plateau of democracy**

Fahd Humayun

Tuesday, Dec 14, 2021

After some speculation about whether or not it would be included in the list of invitees to attend the global Summit for Democracy, Islamabad’s decision to ultimately stay out is unlikely to go unnoticed, even if it is not exactly a surprise.

The language in the carefully-worded statement from the Foreign Office – that Pakistan did not mind engaging with Washington on a range of issues, and that it remains committed to expanding the breadth of the Pak-US relationship – is more or less in line with how the country has tried to template its engagement with Washington since the Biden Administration took office almost a year ago.

Few will deny that, since then, the Pak-US relationship has operated under the radar, characterised most notably by the lack of a direct line between the leaderships of the two countries. This lack of high-level contact, barring a few desultory exchanges, seems to have contributed in part to Islamabad’s reluctance to be a part of a virtual convention that, many agree, was defined more by those who were omitted than those who were included. The summit’s subtext – deepening Sino-US competition that is obliging a slew of small and middle power countries to pick sides – will only have contributed to Islamabad’s unease, given that it has consistently maintained it sees this as a false choice.

The evolution of Pakistan’s foreign policy avatar has a handful of distinctions; chief among them is the fact that it is a three-way product of the country’s premium location, historical ties with Washington, and close rapport with Beijing. It is encouraging, therefore, that decision-makers were quick to recognise that not participating in the Democracy Summit would send a less blurry signal of geostrategic impartiality than participating would. That said, the demands borne off difficult foreign policy choices have to be shouldered.

Even as Pakistan continues to maintain the importance of not superimposing unenviable global binaries on South Asia, it must doubly fend off impressions (at home and abroad) that turning down Washington’s invitation in any way diminishes the country’s investments in democracy at home. This goes far beyond the brick edifice of ensuring free and fair elections and civilian supremacy. At a time when the state’s capacity to stave off religious extremism has rightfully been called into question, the resilience of Pakistan’s democracy, now more than ever before, depends on the dexterity with which it can negotiate democracy’s darker tendencies, from the centralising impulses of executive power, to the expanding majoritarian aspirations of street entities such as the TLP.

The imperative of doing so is as local as it is geopolitical. It is true the Western community (led by the US) is unlikely to update its default scepticism on Pakistan anytime soon – the costly geostrategic tradeoffs this has entailed notwithstanding. But if anything is sure to move Washington’s needle on Pakistan over the next three years, it is the extent to which Pakistan’s leaders defy America’s expectations of democratic fragility and socio-economic insolvency in a region that is frankly immune to neither. Succeeding on the first will make it harder for US officials to deny the value of outreach to the world’s fourth most populous democracy, even if the West continues to hold democratic consolidation and human rights in Pakistan to a higher standard relative to the rest of Pakistan’s neighbourhood. Succeeding on the second, meanwhile, will make Pakistan naturally more attractive to private investors, and a better fit for businesses looking to build partnerships in a socio-economic climate free of mob violence and public lynchings.

Taken together, these attributes can create a good case for more robust bilateral engagement with not just the US, but a host of European and Eurasian actors irrespective of their alignment on an over-determined Sino-US chessboard. This is not to say shoring up democracy at home is just about virtue-signaling. On the contrary, it communicates that Pakistan’s strategic choices – the desire for peaceful relations with its neighbors, progressive relationships with America, China and European Union, and vision of open markets, greater trade and regional integration – are rooted firmly in the democratic aspirations of its 220 million citizens. It also communicates that the gravitational pull of Pakistan’s orbit – and indeed whether that orbit remains more multipolar than unipolar over time – is in turn a function of the democratic choices made by Pakistan’s youth, a sizable 63 percent of the country’s population.

Suffice to say, visions of democratic peace theory only have sell-value if the state producing them respects parliamentary procedure and rule of law on the one hand, and affords space to federalist expression on the other. This includes offering space to journalists and a civil society that values social and religious pluralism. These are investments worth making. While nurturing democratic values at home is crucial for Pakistan’s survival as a federal Islamic republic that is at peace with itself, these values can also help Pakistan better avoid getting caught in a tangled web of superpower tripwires.

It also helps that, despite the many challenges facing the Pak-US relationship, pragmatists in Islamabad and Washington remain fairly aware of the multiple logics keeping it off the ventilator. These logics range from addressing the unfolding human catastrophe playing out in Afghanistan; to ensuring counterterror cooperation against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; to diversifying US equity in a geo-strategically important part of the world. The latter has the potential to become even more salient if India continues to fall on global democracy rankings. And it is worth noting that Pakistan’s inclusion alongside India in Washington’s invitee list only shows that even the US is open to balancing its interests in its two star-crossed allies at the behest of its broader strategic end goals.

In a similar vein, Pakistan would be wise to keep balancing its own external interests, without compromising on democratic renewal at home.

The writer is a PhD candidate at Yale.

He tweets @fahdhumayun