**Adding detail to Afghanistan**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2021-07-13

AFGHANISTAN is the new black in Islamabad.

Zoom seminars (Skype is so pre-Covid-19), in camera briefings, talk shows and column space in newspapers there is no forum for discussions which can afford to ignore our next-door neighbour currently. Unsurprisingly then, Afghanistan watchers are busy people these days as they juggle multiple speaking commitments.

They are surpassed by the man of the hour, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, whose press talks now seem to be more frequent than Firdous Ashig Awan`s. Last week, however, he also took time out to brief the Senate Committee of Foreign Affairs along with National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf; the briefing was also attended by a bunch of journalists, much to the chagrin of some.

Despite the bleariness and lack of caffeine (which the minister too seemed to have missed if his testy exchange with the chairperson, Sherry Rehman, was any indication), it was hard to miss the running theme or should it be themes? in our `officialese` on Afghanistan: how the withdrawal of the international forces was inevitable because a mili.

tary solution was and is impossible; how negotiations with the Taliban were the need from day one; the unravelling within Afghanistan at the present; and the fallout in Pakistan, which is not just the refugee problem but also the possible strengthening of the TTP due to its links with the Afghan Taliban.

Not a wrong note here in some ways, as past mistakes were also acknowledged by underling Pakistan`s current efforts in reaching out to all ethnicities in Afghanistan.

But it is hard to miss how there is far greater emphasis on the past than the future. The latter appears dark in most accounts, here and abroad, but in our own officialdom what is more noticeable is the apparent lack of detail. Only a bleak outline in broad brushstrokes is offered. And Pakistan`s policy options are also offered in similarly vague terms.

Consider what the foreign minister said on Friday: `Khudanakhwasta if there is violence and if there isrepeat of the nineties. .

But he never explained if there was any other `if` If there is not a protracted civil war, what else can happen? It was never explained during the lengthy meeting. And if this isn`t explained, the question of Pakistan`s choices never arises. No wonder then it`s easy to reduce Pakistan`s policy to: we want peace; we don`t want to repeat past mistakes and we want national consensus.

But a national consensus on what and how? Even the politicians who were invited to the in-camera briefing can provide little detail on this, or are deliberately withholding it from nosy journalists.

Moeed Yusuf, who spoke af ter SMQ at the meeting, was a little less loquacious and hence easier to follow. He spoke of dealing with the refugee crisis as well as focusing on counterterrorism within and the absence of an economic plan for Afghanistan. In addition, he underlined how protracted violence will present Pakistan with an uncontrollable situation.

But what does this `violence` look like? Does it mean that any efforts at a negotiated settlement will fail and a protracted civil war will break out? In such a scenario, are we assuming the present government will cling on to Kabul or that the Taliban will overrun Kabul but then struggle to impose their writ on the entire country? In either case, Pakistan will continue with its efforts for a negotiated settlement but in the latter case, will it recognise the new set-up in Kabul? We would be able to discuss this only if we provide more detail to the broader brushstroke of `there will be violence`.

More important still, what do we mean by, even if we expect, `a repeat of the nineties`? There are no identifiable mujahideen groups at the moment, as there were in the 1990s and who then succumbed to infighting despite signing agreements. Even the north is apparently not as unified as it was earlier, say experts, while the Taliban have made inroads into the region.

Or are we referring to the possibility of the emer-gence of warlords and local militias? And if so, how will the Taliban react? And why is Pakistan expecting or only talking of this `worst-case scenario` (as some of the officialese specifies) when much emphasis is placed on the Taliban having changed? As Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, `The Taliban have changed`, calling them `smart` and `savvy`.

What are the possible scenarios now that the Taliban are smarter? Could this lead to some negotiations, reducing the level of violence? And if the Taliban are `smart` enough to realise they need international recognition and acceptance, because they understand the need for international aid to sustain Afghanistan, how long will it flow for? And what may happen once the coffers are shut? We do not know, for it is only ever mentioned in passing. This assumption or knowledge is never used to build scenarios for the benefit of the rest of us who are not privileged enough for the incamera briefings.

This lack of information is not just due to our opaque foreign policymaking process. (The Friday briefing was a break from the past where briefings were held away from the public eye.) It may also have much to do with our perceptions of Afghanistan as the next-door neighbour perpetually engulfed in violence. What the details of this violence are and how it may change, in nature and context, is of little interest or concern. In some ways, it is akin to the Western view of Pakistan when we were labelled as the `most dangerous country in the world` by American officials as well as mainstream media.

It would do us all well to remember that better understanding is the first step to a better relationship. And those claiming that we have learnt from past mistakes need to keep this in mind when speaking of our policy towards Afghanistan, as should those of us whose job it is to ask questions of the ones in power. The writer is a joumalist.