**Our Afghan policy**

B Y N A J M U D D I N A . S H A I K H | 1/30/2020

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| `BOTH [the US and Pakistanj are on the same page that there`s no military solution in Afghanistan and we are working hard to bring peace to the country,` said Prime Minister Imran Khan in an interview with CNBC last week. Clearly, the PM`s reference was to efforts Pakistan is making in tandem with the Khalilzad-Taliban talks in Doha for a ceasefire or at least `reduction in violence` as a prelude to dialogue between the Taliban and Kabul government. So far there is no sign the Taliban are willing to do this, or go beyond reaching an agreement for US troop withdrawal in exchange for their pledge not to allow Afghanistan to be used to plan terrorist attacks against the US and to abjure ties with Al Qaeda, Daesh or other terrorist groups.  Is this enough to bring peace to an Afghanistan in which government forces would have lost control of a number of provincial capitals were it not for US air support operations and cash support for its largely ineffective local forces? The Kabul government is fragmented and there`s little chance that it will become more united or self-sustaining. Now President Ghani says he is `totally ready` for a withdrawal of 4,000 of the 12,000 US troops, but the Taliban want a complete withdrawal though they may be open to making this phased.  The Taliban have said that they do not want to monopolise power but would want to revise the Afghan constitution to make it conform to their interpretation of Sharia, and would include others in the power structure on terms they deem appropriate. In their view, Trump is intent on withdrawing and no further concessions are necessary.  This could set the stage for another civil war.  Pakistan must sadly come to the conclusion that while we wish to promote peace, the dire situation in Afghanistan will leave us no choice but to insulate ourselves even while taking every step possible to help with reconciliation. This means: We must ask the Taliban on our soil to move back to Afghanistan and carry on negotiations with the US from their bases in Helmand and Kandahar. Make it clear that we recognise the Kabul government and support an Afghan-led and -owned peace process. This negotiation, if it materialises, will be long and complex; if asl(ed we will try to help.  Pakistan should ensure our refugees commissioner exercises complete control over all camps, and prohibits clandestine addition to the refugee population or use of the camps as Taliban recuperation centres. While continuing to treat Afghan patients in our hospitals, we would carefully vet anyone with battlefield wounds. Complete the fencing of the border and, with UNODC, strengthen our surveillance on smuggler movements. Dealwith local influentials on the Afghan side of the border to maintain peace, offering financial inducements if necessary.  We can facilitate Pak-Afghan trade and make suitable concessions to ensure Afghan goods are marketed here and beyond our borders. The truck monitoring system the PM has authorised would be an essential tool to check smuggling. With Chinese cooperation, allow Afghanistan to use CPEC and to the extent possible to facilitate the use of CPEC by Central Asian states. Make prompt royalty and transit payments to the Afghan government.  Pakistan ought to prevail on the Americans, who eschew nation-building even under a non-Trump administration, to continue to provide material support for the salaries of 320,000 Afghan National Defence forces as well as budgetary support, while seeking to curb corruption, which would allow at least some maintenance of education and health services. The plea should be based on the fact that an Afghan collapse would adversely affect the entire region, andmay prove a repeat of the power vacuum left after the collapse of the Soviet Union which left us to cope with the detritus of the war, and led to Al Qaeda`s preponderant innuence in Afghanistan, and then 9/11.  We should also be prepared in the future to helpAfghanistan exploit its mineral deposits (estimated to be worth anywhere between $1-3 trillion) and explore the possibility of matching Pakistan`s mineral resources with those of Afghanistan`s (bringing copper ore from Afghanistan`s Aynak Copper mine to Reko Dig and thus having enough ore to justify the setting up of a refinery unit within our borders instead of exporting raw ore).  The more important and urgent of the many points I have listed are obviously (1) to persuade the Americans and their allies to continue their financial assistance to Afghanistan, and (ii) to make improvements in our governance structures which alone will allow us to take all these recommended steps. Afghan leaders of all stripes will continue to hold us responsible for their unfortunate plight. But this is something we can afford to live with as long as the border remains unaffected. The writer is a former foreign secretary, and currently head of loBM`s Global and Regional Studies Centre. |