**Waiting for a call**

BY MUH AMMAD ALI SIDDlQI 2021-08-11

IS a call from Joe Biden to Imran Khan going to decide the fate of humanity, or of Afghanistan and Pakistan singly or collectively? The answer seems to be a yes, going by the perturbation over the issue in some government circles who seem never to have bothered to know how the American `system` circumscribes a president`s ability to be on his own. Only his aides would have told Donald Trump which countries share a border with China.

Americans by the very nature of their education are focused on their country. This is one of their major advantages and has made America great, but it also translates into a shocking inability to grasp the intricacies of a foreign, especially non-European problem.

Yet, in spite of this legacy, some American executives excelled at geopolitics.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was in a class by himself and made Churchill sweat at Yalta.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the only president who participated in the two world wars, played his cards well during the Cold War, while Richard Nixon was exceptionally brilliant at external relations, helped in no small measure by that legend, Henry Kissinger. His people were unkind to him, but he proved his mettle after he was no more president. Also to leave a name in history is Jimmy Carter, who stunned the world by his dramatic success at Camp David, 1978, where Israel agreed to quit the Sinai Peninsula in return for Egyptian recognition of the Jewish state.

While the disastrous commando raid on Iran denied Carter a second term, Bill Clinton, a Rhodes scholar, was well-armed academically. Mauled by Monicagate, Clinton scuttled his chances of success at the three-party summit at Camp David 2000 by choosing confirmed Zionists, including Dennis Ross, Madeleine Albright and Martin Indyk, as his delegates. As pointed out by Clayton Swisher, in his book The Truth about Camp David, Clinton couldn`t play honest broker because his team acted as an Israeli delegation. Since then the quality of American presidents in terms of their grasp of international relations hasn`t inspired much confidence among friends and foes.

Ignoring Donald Trump, American presidents go largely by their aides. Experts in their fields of concern, these aides well entrenched in the State Department, the Pentagon and key Senate and House committees have an agenda that is all their own and represent powerful lobbies which no president can ignore. In fact, it is these aides who ensure a continuity and relative consistency in American foreign policy, and the ascension of a new president only marginally changes the broad outlines ofAmerica`s worldview.

Notice that the anti-China Quad, nurtured by Trump, is still part of America`s Indo-Pacific policy, though admittedly there is a slight toning down of the Trumpera rhetoric. On Iran, the Democratic administration has definitely exhibited less bellicosity, though it is still premature to guess what its attitude will be towards the 2015 nuclear deal, especially when Ebrahim Raisi, an ultra-conservative, is in power in Tehran.

Now back to the hype about a laconic call that in any case will be symbolic in nature.

Will the prime minister have a moment of epiphany? Should we really be so naïve as to expect a breakthrough in what the president has to tell the prime minister after America made it clear to the whole world that the country, notwithstanding its economic, military and scientific might, had been defeated after 21 years of uninhibited slaughter? Astonishingly, this stentorian admission of defeat and the announcementof the pullout date showed no traces of remorse. Thus, the phone dialogue, if it takes place, will be characterised by the redcence thatis one of Biden`s assets. Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, two excellent spokesmen for India, have already poisonedBiden`s mind, and there is little Imran Khan can do in a few minutes to detoxify the American president`s thoughts.

Post-America Afghanistan is going to bleed. An indication of it came f rom L ashkar Gah, for Afghan commander Gen Sami Sadat asked the people to flee their ancestral homes for reasons he didn`t bother to reveal but are obvious ie indiscriminate bombing whose victims will be largely civilians. The panicky Lashkar Gah people will obviously flee to the nearest peaceful neighbourhood Pakistan.

In an interview with TheFinancial Times, National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf said if things with America did not go well Islamabad had other options. Really? Islamabad, like Washington, has no options.

We have just one option to stand on our own. In fact, we have no choice but to stand alone, because other than China we have no real friends, Turkey and Malaysia being of no consequence. Even the oil-rich `brothers` are indifferent. The US has one option, and it is good at it: keep bombing Afghanistan ad infinitum.  The writer is Dawn`s external ombudsman.