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**Navigating choppy waters**

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As the Biden Administration prepares to complete the drawdown of its forces from Afghanistan, the region is in a great flux. The post-withdrawal scenario has forced the regional countries to rush back to the drawing board to form a fresh assessment of the prevailing situation in Afghanistan and think of more innovative ways to deal with the fallout.

There is discernible anxiety generated by the prospect of fresh bouts of violence gripping the war-torn country and spilling over to the neighbouring countries. The exiting Americans may have suffered war fatigue, aided as much by ambiguity in the objectives of the long-drawn-out war as by the history of the Afghan conflicts involving the great powers.

The lesson that no invading power ever came out flaunting victory has been reinforced with the latest pullout of the world’s mightiest military. Americans are perplexed by the thought of Afghanistan becoming a breeding ground for terror. Hence, all-out efforts to set up bases for what they term as ‘counterterrorism operations’.

The biggest of policy somersaults dictated by the weight of circumstances has been India’s outreach to the Afghan Taliban, something unimaginable before President Biden’s announcement to pull out keeping in view the history of bad blood between them.

Pakistan, being a next-door neighbour with legitimate stakes in Afghanistan, has a job cut out here. On the one hand, it has to prepare itself for the likely surge in TTP-perpetrated violence and the arrival of more refugees into the country. On the other, dealing with the recalibration of ties with the US, a euphemism for increased demands through a proverbial policy of stick and carrot, presents a serious challenge.

Faced with such choppy waters that will test Pakistan’s ability to address yet another challenge with implications for its security, economy as well as the push for regional connectivity, policy clarity is the foremost requirement. The country’s history is replete with examples wherein obscurity marked decision-making at pivotal points, leaving the people guessing as to the ‘terms of engagement.’

Given this history, clarity as well as the articulation of policy objectives is not precisely a Pakistani thing.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Imran Khan’s recent engagement with the foreign media needs to be analysed. Choosing a couple of TV networks as well as newspapers carefully for his interviews as well as an op-ed, the prime minister put across Pakistan’s foreign policy position on a host of issues that are critical to the peace, stability and economic development of the country.

A careful review of these media engagements shows how PM Khan addressed questions relating to the evolving nature of our relationship with Afghanistan, the US and India in view of the latest situation on these counts in addition to setting the broad parameters of engagement.

Fundamental to the positions taken by him has been Pakistan’s desire to privilege the pursuit of geo-economics as the key shaper of the country’s foreign policy. Articulated only recently at the Islamabad Security Dialogue, the pivot to geo-economics is becoming more visible in policy pronouncements, though exact details in terms of the short- to medium- and long-term goals have yet to be outlined.

On Afghanistan, Pakistan’s position represents a welcome departure. It is informed by the lesson of history: choosing sides in a bitterly divided country along ethnic lines has done the country more harm than good. In addition to being held responsible by rival factions for all that has gone wrong, earning their opposition in the process, Pakistan has been scapegoated by the world community, principally the US, for the mess they have failed to clear despite pumping in trillions of dollars and deploying the fiercest of war machines.

Prime Minister Khan’s forceful assertion that Pakistan could be “partners with the United States in peace and never in conflict” underscores this country’s quest for a new path in the post-withdrawal regional scenario. As he put it eloquently, the cost of becoming part of as open-ended a conflict as Afghanistan has been disastrous for Pakistan’s economy and society with over 70,000 dead and $150 billion lost.

The prime minister’s unequivocal support for a political arrangement in Afghanistan that is the result of a consensus between the Afghan parties is the right thing to do. The military takeover of Kabul will lead to a protracted civil war with unimaginable consequences not just for Afghanistan but also Pakistan.

It is unfortunate that the relationship between Pakistan and the Ghani government has soured at a critical time when both sides needed to work together to chart a shared course forward. In a rare moment of candidness, PM Khan admitted Pakistan’s diminishing influence with the Taliban who find themselves at the ‘cusp of historic victory’ after President Biden declared the winding up of his Afghanistan mission.

Pakistan has already employed its maximum influence, evidenced by the signing of the Doha agreement that created conditions for the US to pull out. Expecting Islamabad to go beyond this is not only unrealistic but also unfair to the country that has been on the receiving side for a long time.

In yet another instance of candidness, PM Khan’s criticism of the manner in which the game-changing decisions were made opaquely to plunge the country into the conflicts of others is certain to trigger a much-needed debate. For long have the Pakistani people suffered the consequences of wars that were imposed upon them without their knowledge, leave alone consent. A reset in the decision-making process that is guided by the need to protect our interests is a strategic imperative.

How Pakistan-US relations will play out in the post-withdrawal period has been a vexed question, thirsting for a realistic answer. More so the case when the history of bilateral ties has established the transactional approach being the governing principle of the relationship.

Away from the bureaucratic iterations, PM Khan tried to spell out the broad contours of “a civilized relationship” with the US based on ‘common interests.’ He pitched Pakistan as a country of ‘strategic relevance’ to America in terms of the huge market, youth bulge and geostrategic location with connectivity as its defining feature.

PM Khan’s policy articulation to pursue a relationship with both the US and China, independent of each other, makes perfect sense for a developing country that has enormous challenges on its hands. In what is fast appearing to be a ‘cold war’, the Sino-US competition is poised to suck Pakistan in an unenviable position the leaders in Islamabad would choose not to be part of.

Relations with both Washington and Beijing hold immense strategic and economic value to Pakistan. At a time when President Biden continues to set up alliances, QUAD being one of them involving archrival India, Pakistan must offer to be a bridge builder in a repeat of its role in 1971 when Islamabad got the US and China to break the stalemate.

The prime minister’s robust support for a relationship with China represents a multiparty consensus to take the strategic cooperation with the ‘Iron Brother’ forward. This iteration also spells out no-go areas in terms of vital interests of the country.

On India, Pakistan under PM Khan made efforts to turn the corner with New Delhi. However, such bold peace overtures were spurned by the right-wing hawks in New Delhi and the annexation of Occupied Kashmir made the regional dynamic more complex, making peace a distant dream. Pakistan has clearly put peace and normalisation options on the table, provided India can create space for the resumption of dialogue by restoring the status quo ante in the held valley.

At the time of writing these lines, a meeting was underway in Islamabad in which the military and intelligence leadership was briefing the elected parliamentary leaders about the security challenges Pakistan faces. Only a united nation can overcome critical challenges.

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