**Divisions persist**

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| `HE came, he saw, he conquered,` wrote US-based South Asia expert Michael Kugleman in his recent Dawn article on Prime Minister Imran Khan`s Washington sojourn. Perfectly put! One can have Democrat or Republican leanings in the US, PTI, PML-N, PPP or whatever in Pakistan, but if you are a champion of the Pakistan-US relationship in either country, you`ve got to admit that Khan`s trip was special.In my last article before his visit, I had suggested that the Trump-Khan meeting will be the make or break. The relationship begged a shakeup and the two gents needed to click. And they did.Interacting with both sides before the trip, I sensed nervousness. The Pakistani side 1(new the importance of the one-on-one between the leaders and had worked overtime to decipher President Donald Trump`s likes and dislikes. Still, they weren`t willing to wager any bets. The US system, on the other hand, was concerned about Trump going overboard in rolling out the red carpet for Khan, thereby sending, from the bureaucracy`s perspective, a terrible signal: bygones are bygones and the US is ready to mend fences because Pakistan matters.The Pakistani side was all smiles after the White House interaction, but Khan`s visit has left Washington divided. Trump took the charm offensive route, creating a dilemma for his bureaucracy. The view within the system remains that Pakistan needs to be pressured to force greater cooperation on Afghanistan.The divide throws up a couple of serious challenges.First, the natural inclination of those favouring persistent pressure on Pakistan will be to try and walk back some of Trump`s conciliatory signalling. We`ve already seen statements from Washington indicating a more sceptical take on the trip than Trump`s overtures suggested. On the Pakistani side, this reality will likely lead to attempts to bypass the system and work directly with the US president and the pro-Pakistan voices who convinced him to invite Khan.Neither will benefit the relationship. Too sceptical an approach by the US bureaucracy will deflate Pakistan`s incentive to push harder on Afghanistan to satisfy Trump, something I sense Pakistan is now keen to do.On the other hand, while what a US president wants matters, Washington ultimately derives its strength from its institutions. One can`t ignore the institutional processes; any such effort on Pakistan`s part will result in rearguard action by the bureaucracy that`ll stall the momentum this trip initiated.Second, even if we begin to move in a positive direction, the long-standing disconnect between what the US wants from Pakistan and what Pakistan is willing to do has still tobe worked out.On this count, we may be worse off now than we were before the trip, since Trump`s understanding of the guid pro quo from Pakistan in return for his positive outreach is probably less nuanced than the US bureaucracy`s. His desire to get an agreement between the Afghan powerbrokers and the Afghan Taliban in time for his November 2020 re-election bid is well known.Everything he did last week tells me he feels Pakistan is his answer. He doesn`t want Pakistan to merely get the Taliban talking with President Ashraf Ghani, he wants Pakistan to get him a peace deal.The problem is that Pakistan doesn`t have that kind of clout. But if it is unable to either manage or fulfil Trump`s expectations, he will begin to revert to his system`s sceptical view of Pakistan`s utility. We`d be back to square one.So, it is crucial for Pakistan to try as hard as it can in Afghanistan: to help the US secure a satisfactory outcome, while simultaneously seeking the US system`s support to manage Trump`s expectations.I`d be remiss if I didn`t mention that this trip wasn`t only about the TrumpKhan meeting after all. It also touched thousands of Pakistani diaspora in a special way. With nearly 20,000 Pakistani Americans packed inWashington`s Capital One Arena to hear Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, this community event managed to give a true sense of belonging to our otherwise disparate and disjointed diaspora community.Among the crowd were second-generation Pakistanis who have grown up shying away from owning up to their identity rather than cherishing their heritage. Such has been the negativity around Pakistan`s image in popular American imagination. Nonetheless, this generation has an essential role as ambassadors of the US-Pakistan relationship and both Washington and Islamabad must harness their potential. Khan has got the ball rolling in spectacular fashion. In fact, this may well have been his visit`s most lasting contribution.For those of us who see the merits of a strong US-Pakistan relationship, Prime Minister Khan`s visit was a welcome development. It`s now time to build on the reset the Trump-Khan duo has achieved.  The writer is the author of Brokering Peace in Nuclear Environments: US Crisis Management in South Asia. |