**Shared responsibility**

Malik Muhammad Ashraf January 24, 2020

Foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi talking to Fox News during his recent visit to USA while answering a question about Afghanistan was right on money to observe “the convergence between Pakistan and US stands as a unique opportunity for peace in Afghanistan, ultimately a shared responsibility” When President Trump announced his policy on Afghanistan and South Asia the two countries were poles apart in regards to the resolution of the conflict. While US believed in using ruthless power to defeat the Taliban, Pakistan rejecting the envisaged strategy out rightly had maintained that there was no military solution to the conflict and it could only be resolved through negotiated settlement between the US and Taliban and through nudging the process of reconciliation within Afghanistan which in other words meant Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution.

Trump also adopted hard line against Pakistan accusing it of supporting militants and misleading the US over the issue. He also suspended security assistance to Pakistan. In a twitter message he said “The US foolishly has given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid during the last fifteen years and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit thinking our leaders as fools. They give safe havens to the terrorisst we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help No more!. The relations between the two countries plunged into a nosedive.

As envisaged the Trump strategy failed to make any headway and the US administration soon realized the merit of dialogue as contended by Pakistan and sought her support and assistance in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table with the US and also encourage a dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Pakistan stood vindicated.. This convergence between US and Pakistan indeed provided a unique opportunity for peace in Afghanistan.

It is pertinent to point out that Pakistan throughout has been trying its best to arrange interface between Taliban and the afghan government through bilateral and multilateral forums as also have been the other stakeholders like China and Russia. The role played by Pakistan in persuading Taliban for dialogue with US ended the chill in relations between the two countries. President Trump during his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan in November 2019 asked him to help in resolving the Afghan conundrum acknowledging that Pakistan was helping the US to “extricate” its troops from Afghanistan, through political negotiations. President Trump in his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan on the sidelines of World Economic Forum in Davos-- where both the leaders basically discussed the Afghan situation--- has acknowledged that the relations between the two countries were never as cordial as they were at present.

It was due to the efforts of Pakistan that the Taliban agreed to engage in dialogue with the US and when as a consequence of nine rounds of talks over a year the agreement between them to resolve the conflict was ready to be signed in early September last year President Trump suddenly announced cancellation of dialogue with Taliban. He also called off the secret meeting that was scheduled between him and the Taliban representatives and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at Camp David. He cited Taliban attack in Kabul in which 12 people, including a US soldier, were killed as the reason for disruption in dialogue.

The hiatus in dialogue caused great disappointment for Pakistan and all other stakeholders who had worked so hard to facilitate resolution of conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban reacting to the development observed that it would harm US more. However it is satisfying to note that this disruption was not for good and better sense prevailed ultimately. Behind the scene efforts paved the way for resumption of contacts between the US and Taliban after two months. First due to the efforts of the Amir of Qatar there was a swap of prisoners between the Afghan government and the Taliban. A US citizen and an Australian held hostage since 2016 were released along with 10 Afghan soldiers in exchange for three senior members of the Haqqani Network, linked to the Taliban.

A week after the swap of prisoners, President Trump paid an unannounced thanksgiving visit to US troops in Afghanistan in late November 2019. Talking to reporters he broke the news about resumption of contacts with the Taliban saying “US is meeting Taliban. They want to make a deal and we are meeting with them and we are saying it has to be a ceasefire and they didn’t want to do a ceasefire and now they do want to do a ceasefire, I believe. It will probably work out that way,” Taliban sources also confirmed informal contacts.

There seems some progress in the resumed dialogue at Doha. The Taliban have indicated their willingness to a ceasefire. They have also given a positive nod for initiating an intra-Afghan dialogue which could include Ashraf Ghani-led dispensation after a ceasefire has been signed with the Americans. This represents softening in the Taliban’s tone, as previously they have used uncharitable terms for the Kabul government, describing the setup as puppets of the Americans. It is an undeniable reality that there cannot be a lasting peace in Afghanistan without the involvement of the Afghan government. These are surely positive portents suggesting that a deal could be clinched by the end of this month. But as they say there are many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip, one has to greet these developments with a guarded optimism in view of the impulsiveness and unpredictability shown by the two sides in the past.

The fact is that the US, Taliban, Afghan government and Pakistan seem wary of the decades old war and there is also a rare consensus among other countries of the region including Russia, China and Central Asian states who have been affected by the phenomenon of terrorism in varying degrees that the conflict in Afghanistan must end as soon as possible. Peace in Afghanistan is also essential to thwart attempts by IS to gain foothold in Afghanistan by taking advantage of the continued turmoil. It is very much a shared responsibility to establish peace in Afghanistan, particularly of US and Pakistan. However the US will have to show greater flexibility for the much needed honourable exit from Afghanistan.