**Pakistan’s role in peace talks**

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America’s blitzkrieg in Afghanistan, in the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks, supported by Nato members and some other allies achieved its stated objective of dismantling Al-Qaeda and denying it a safe base of operations by removing the Taliban from power. It also led the US into an unending conflict with the Taliban; besides contributing to the rise of terrorism in the region with a global fallout.

The war on terror has been the second longest overseas war by the US after the Vietnam War. The US has paid enormous cost in men and material while trying to achieve military victory over the Taliban, but has failed to triumph even after 17 years.

Trump’s recipe to pursue the objective with increased ferocity as per the new policy on Afghanistan and Asia has also backfired as seen by enhanced terrorist acts and attacks on government installations and US troops.

Pakistan’s leadership – both civilian and military – was right on the money to reject the new policy, reiterating the need for a negotiated settlement as well as reaffirming its commitment to facilitate the process of reconciliation in Afghanistan. It is encouraging to note that the Trump administration has finally realised the folly of pursuing a solution to the Afghan conflict with the barrel of the gun, and asked Pakistan to help bring the Taliban to the negotiating table to find a way to end the Afghan war and bring peace to that war-ravaged country.

By orchestrating direct interface between the Taliban leadership and US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad in the UAE, Pakistan has reinforced its credentials as a sincere peace promoter in Afghanistan. It is pertinent to point out that Pakistan has been playing an active role at multilateral forums as well as at the bilateral level to facilitate Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation in Afghanistan. This notwithstanding the fact that the US and the Afghan government have persistently looked askance at those efforts and have invariably been blaming Pakistan for whatever was happening in Afghanistan as well as for providing sanctuaries to the Taliban, particularly the Haqqani network – without ever providing any concrete evidence to that effect.

In hindsight, the US military adventure in Afghanistan was indeed a terribly wrong move with egoistic overtones and the revengeful mindset typical of mighty powers. The US administration simply failed to visualise the consequences of attacking a sovereign state only on the basis of its refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda leaders without credible proof of their involvement in the 9/11 attacks. Perhaps prudent diplomatic moves, proof of Al-Qaeda’s involvement in 9/11 and the promise of some aid to the Taliban government would have persuaded them to extradite Osama Bin Laden and dismantle Al-Qaeda’s network in the country.

The US not only itself indulged in an unimaginative military adventure, but also coerced Pakistan to join the war on terrorism as a frontline state; this gradually became Pakistan’s war.

Pakistan has suffered the most for being part of this effort. It is estimated that the country suffered financial losses to the tune of $150 billion during the last 17 years, besides sacrificing 80,000 lives including military personnel and civilians. Pakistan would be the last country to wish for the continuation of the Afghan conflict in the backdrop of the extent to which it has suffered. It earnestly feels that ending the conflict is inevitable for peace in Afghanistan and taking the war on terror to its logical end. It was out of this considered view and commitment that Pakistan took indiscriminate action against all terrorist outfits located in North Waziristan, followed by Operation Raddul Fasaad and the unilateral decision to fence the entire Pak-Afghan border and build watch-post and forts to prevent terrorists’ cross-border movements.

Regrettably, the US has all along been raising an accusing finger towards Pakistan, despite the fact that Pakistan has been insisting that the US provides credible evidence of the terrorist sanctuaries that it claims are located in Pakistan so that appropriate action can be taken against them. The US never came forth with any. It seems that it was a deliberate attempt on America’s part to portray Pakistan as a fall guy for its failure in Afghanistan as a consequence of its wrong strategies.

It is, however, a good sign that the US has appreciated and welcomed Pakistan’s efforts in facilitating the dialogue with the Taliban. The vibes emanating from the UAE after the initial round of talks indicate that the US wants the Taliban to announce a six-month-long ceasefire, join the national unity government that is to be installed in Afghanistan in the future and become part of the Afghan political system. The Taliban want the US to release all their prisoners, lift the ban on movement of their leaders, remove their names from the blacklist and announce a deadline for the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Taliban are also reported to have shown their willingness to agree on the proposed ceasefire – provided Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE become guarantors and the future Afghan government is given to someone who also has the consent of the Taliban.

The sticking point remains the time-schedule for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghan soil, which all along has been the demand of the Taliban. Media reports quote Waheed Muzdha, a former Taliban official in Kabul who remains in regular contact with them, as having said that an earlier interaction between the US and the Taliban in September was also stuck over the issue of maintenance of two US bases in Bagram and Shorabak. The Taliban are not willing to accept the presence of US military personnel in Afghanistan except the ones required for security of the US diplomatic mission.

The Taliban’s willingness to accept the proposed ceasefire for six months is a sign of flexibility on their part. The major responsibility now rests with the US. The superpower has to exhibit more flexibility on the sticking points to pave the way for any possible settlement. The Taliban surely have shown that flexibility as a consequence of persuasion by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Taliban would like to oblige them as they were the only three countries which not only extended diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime, but also supported it.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has also said that Pakistan will do everything possible to further the peace process in Afghanistan, and also prayed for the success of the ongoing peace initiative. It is indeed a historic opportunity to establish peace in Afghanistan. However, much will depend on America’s response to the Taliban’s demands. The US started the conflict and only it can end it – provided it really wanted an honourable exit from Afghanistan.

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