**PM Imran Khan vs Biden White House**

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America’s longest war, costing over $2.26 trillion and resulting in some 241,000 casualties (71,00 civilians), is heading towards its conclusion this year. Yet its policymakers are exploring options to maintain a small regional presence in order to pursue counter-terrorism and intelligence operations in Afghanistan. Of course, the first country that sprang to mind to help on this front was Pakistan, which has borne brunt of this bloody war on an exponential scale; particularly during the previous decade.

But did Washington receive a firm reply for this request? Not at all! Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan has remained consistent on his historical stance of disallowing any kind of US military presence within Pakistani territory. Since he’s at the helm of affairs now, the Biden administration had been using multiple forums to convince him on the matter but every single time, the answer has remained a firm ‘no’.

Notably, there’s a strange perception in the Pakistani media that the civilian government and the military aren’t working together on this matter despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. When CIA chief William Burns visited a couple of weeks ago, PM Khan’s refusal to meet him over basing rights represented part of a larger scheme of not allowing Islamabad to be scapegoated once again. Burns should have done his homework before seeking an audience with the man who always opposed the US military presence in the region.

It’s a separate story that protocols do not allow an intelligence chief or anyone below a certain rank to meet a foreign head of government or state like this. But then past Pakistani leaders were always keen to meet each and every US delegation, regardless of diplomatic norms. Maybe it was the first time that a Pakistani leader chose to act with dignity and this is what took the other side by surprise.

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The biggest hint that PM Khan declined basing rights came from US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s press briefing earlier this week in which he indicated talking with other regional countries on the issue.

What’s causing this desperation are America’s own limitations in the region and its inability to look beyond security dimensions despite spending a significant amount on infrastructural development in Afghanistan itself.

The Afghan Taliban, though factionalised, have emerged as key players who are very much outside Pakistan’s influence regardless of the global media’s perception. Though they should not be trusted blindly given their volatile attitude, keeping them onboard is the only way forward for ensuring lasting peace.

Then we have people in the Afghan government who act as spoilers, sabotaging the ongoing peace process at the behest of New Delhi which has recently opened a line of communications with specific factions of the Afghan Taliban. These spoilers would soon lose their prominence but shall make a last ditch effort to remain relevant.

For Pakistan, another US military presence at one of its bases would  mean that its leaders would have learned nothing from the past (going way back to the 1960s). Of course, who could forget the doublespeak of civilian and military leaderships that chose to turn a blind eye to the controversial drone strikes starting back in 2004, which increased enormously under the Obama adminsitration.

Perhaps, it was a blessing in disguise that PM Khan was coincidentally leading from the front and refused to budge over the matter. His reasoning is based on frosty historical ties that proved harmful for Islamabad and without any tangible outcome for bilateral ties with Washington, which took it for granted.

Over the past year or so, Pakistan’s focus has remained on economic diplomacy which the previous Trump administration was looking to prioritise. Once Biden took over, the Daniel Pearl murder case was the first thing which reshaped ties initially owing to a court judgment which provided temporary relief to Pakistani-British terrorist Ahmad Omar Saeed Sheikh.

For that, one can’t blame America which did have legitimate concerns given the sensitivity of the matter. But then what happened afterwards? Secretary of State Antony Blinken chose to give less importance to Islamabad and considered New Delhi to be a more prominent ally despite its descent into far-right religious nationalism and blatant disregard for human rights. Anyone remember how the new administration sought to pursue a foreign policy based on human rights and justice? That backfired when selective morality and values are the hallmark of this administration that could not speak or do anything for the Palestinians or the Kashmiris.

Yes, it’s all about realpolitik and strategic interests to counter Chinese and Russian influence across several parts of the world but tall promises prove costly. Talking about Uighurs but ignoring the plight of people in a similar or worse situation implies that Washington has lost its moral ground. Of course, the Uighurs require global attention but is this really the way to get back at Beijing? A paradox on its own.

Let one be reminded that Secretary Blinken was part of the team which designed the infamous Af-Pak policy in 2009 that prioritised security dimensions. If he’s still following the same policy then he hasn’t learned anything in the last few years  — especially when it comes to Pakistan which isn’t the same as it was in early 2010s.

On economic diplomacy with the US, Pakistan’s National Security Advisor Dr Moeed Yusuf has remained vocal and pressed for ties beyond security dimensions on a number of occasions. Pakistan and the US have a lot to work on collectively when it comes to trade and investment fronts whose full potential is yet to be tapped.

In a bizarre turn of events, the Financial Times recently claimed that Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin was using Pakistan’s leverage over the US military to gain IMF concessions. Of course, he vehemently denied these claims and his ministry chose to issue a rebuttal. This speaks volumes of the sensitivity of the situation and how Islamabad does not wish to be dragged into the mess unnecessarily.

As for President Biden and PM Khan’s telephone call, the time is now to speak and Washington should ideally make the first move to clear any differences. An indifferent attitude by the White House is doing more harm than good especially when it did not invite PM Khan to the Climate Change Summit in April despite Pakistan hosting a UN-sponsored global conference on World Environment Day earlier this month.

Ties based on mutual respect and trust is what PM Khan is looking for and if the Biden White House is unwilling to look beyond a certain point then the loss isn’t Pakistan’s, which cannot afford to start another war on its doorstep.  Getting off FATF grey list, stabilising the economy and pursuing fruitful economic relations with Washington is all that the new Pakistani leadership seeks.

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