Trump vs Pakistan

BY TOUQlR H USSAIN | 2/20/2020

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| A US-Taliban deal appears to be imminent. Full analysis of its significance for the future of Afghanistan will have to wait until the terms of the agreement are finalised. But, from what we already know, its implications for Pakistan and US-Pakistan relations are not hard to anticipate.  America`s war in Afghanistan will end, but not the four-decades-old Afghan conflict. That would have required a comprehensive peace deal, for which Washington had no time and the Taliban no desire.  The Taliban and Afghan government will now face of f in a long, drawn-out political and military battle that will also drag Pakistan in. This will be the unfinished battle for Afghanistan for which, historically, the Taliban have not been the only agent of conflict; as nor can they be the only instrument for peace now.  Americans are aware of the unresolved issues. In an interview to ABC News on Nov 10 last year, US Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Mark Milley admitted that `the objective of the Afghanistan war had not been achieved`. With their own presence diminished, Washington would need good relations with Pakistan to share its burden of growing challenges in the region. Yet managing the relationship will remain difficult for both sides. For Pakistan, bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table in the US-Taliban talks was the easy part. Now begins the hard part.  The reality is that, the days of a high-profile US aid relationship with Pakistan are over. Such a relationship depends on a highprofile issue that needs Pakistan`s cooperation, which enjoys support from the US Congress, media and the public, besides providing clear and unambiguous security or strategic benefits. Such conditions do not exist.  So much has changed globally, and in American foreign policy and its involvement in South Asia. The 21st century`s unstable power balance, the emerging US-China rivalry, and the post-9/11 security challenges have all impacted South Asia. In meeting these challenges, Washington does not always find Pakistan on the right side. Any attempt by the US and Pakistan to create a strategic framework for bilateral cooperation is foiled by contradictions, within their own relationship and between their other strategic interests. We are dealing with a very different world and a different America that f aces an identity crisis, troubled democracy and threats to its global dominance.  Pakistan should not be carried away by Trump`s sweet talk. Trump`s remarks, whether on foreign or domestic policy, are political, not policy statements. They areopportunities to talk about himself. When he says that relations with Pakistan have never been better, he means that they were worse under preceding US presidents when Pakistan was an uncooperative ally, but that he has now fixed this. It pleases his support base, but should not mislead Pakistanis.  Trump has found a secretary of state who shares his foreign policy outlook. He has left it to him to operationalise the policy side of it while he takes care of the politics and marketing with threats and sweet talk.  The substance of the US approach to Pakistan has been settled. It will be transactional. Pakistan is making a mistake by looking for a strategic framework for the relationship. The challenge for both sides is not how to form a strategic relationship but how to make even a transactional relationship work. There is certainly a possibility of enhanced economic and commercial relationship, but Trump is playing hard to get.  He pursues a heavy-handed approach withenhanced leverage for himself and a diminished one for his interlocutor.  To get Pakistan`s cooperation on issues of interest, the US is taking advantage of Pakistan`s economic weakness with threats and leverages relating to FATF and CPEC.The aim is to keep up the pressure and mix it with cost-free sweet talk, like the promise to help on Kashmir. If Pakistan obliges, it would be `rewarded` with the lifting of the pressure.  A weak Pakistan will always have a troubled relationship with the US, giving the latter anupper hand. Butif Pakistan setsits own house in order, reduces dependency on the IMF and takes care of the FATF issue, this would deny Washington the use of its financial leverage and enhance Pakistan`s bargaining position. Pakistan can then drive a hard bargain for its cooperation rather than seek the mirage of a structured relationship. This is a deal-making administration. It does not have much taste for grand designs, strategic thinking or longterm views.  Bottom line: Trump`s sweet talk is not for real. Listen to both Trump and Alice Wells, but pay more attention to her.  The writer, a former ambassador, is adjunct faculty Georgetown University and senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore. |