**Triangular mistrust**

BY A . R A U F K. K H A T T A K | 10/7/2019

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| THE end of the ninth round of talks in Doha was a pregnant moment when, for the first time, both sides announced that the 19-year-long war in Afghanistan was finally coming to a close. But US President Donald Trump had not realised that he had invited the Afghan Taliban to Camp David just a few days before the anniversary of 9/11. He avoided looking silly in the eyes of the American people by running away from the accord just in time. Unfortunately, Afghan peace has always been held hostage to the self-interest of the parties involved, with scant regard for the people of Afghanistan.After realising that war was not winnable on the battlefield, then president Obama for the first time authorised talks with the Taliban in September 2010. Taliban leader Mullah Omar did not show an aversion to talks. German intelligence discovered that a young, little known, close confidant of Omar, Tayyab Agha, has been authorised by him to test the waters and make contacts with the American side. The Americans took a long time verifying the authenticity of Agha`s identity and connections.In January 2009, then US secretary of state Hillary Clinton appointed Richard Holbrooke as the US` special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was credited with brokering the Dayton Agreement (November 1995), which ended the Bosnian war. Holbrooke, however, failed to win Obama`s confidence; Obama complained about his mannerisms. The position was then assumed by Marc Grossman after Holbrooke`s sudden death in December 2010.Grossman met Agha in person for the first time in Doha in the summer of 2011. In his various meetings with Grossman, Agha acknowledged the mistakes of the Taliban in the past, underlined the necessity of having good relationships with the outside world and better relations with all Afghan ethnicities, not just the Pakhtuns. He said, `Our leadership in Pakistan send their girls to school and even university. We realise the importance of girls` education for homes and the country.The talks did not take of f. Part of it can be explained by the attitude of the Americans: it was lack of seriousness.The Paris Peace Accords that ended the war in Vietnam was signed in January 1973, after four years of negotiations. Both sides showed seriousness by appointing their stalwarts to the talks. Henry Kissinger, national security adviser in 1969 and secretary of state in 1973, represented the US. He was a practitioner of realpolitik, pioneered the policy of détente with the Soviet Union and opened relations with the People`s Republic of China. Similarly, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) was repre-sented by Le Duc Tho, a general, diplomat and politician who had helped found the Indochina Communist Party.The decade of 2000-2010 was lost to war by the clashing agendas of the US, the Hamid Karzai government in Kabul and Pakistan.Each party wanted to have the best outcome for itself. They were deeply suspicious of eachother.Both the US and Afghan governments believed that the key to unlocking the door to peace was held by Pakistan. Generals Kayani and Pasha were at the centre of the US and Nato attention. Kayani took three white papers to Washington; one in 2009, the second in July 2010 and the third in October 2010. In Washington, they came to be known as `Kayani 1.0`, `Kayani 2.0` and `Kayani 3.0`.At the Pentagon, sceptics read the latter as a coercive ultimatum: you are doomed without us, and if you don`t manage Afghanistanwhile accommodating our core interests, you will f ail.In the spring of 2010, under the rubric of `strategic dialogue` Holbrooke showed Kayani and Pasha around Washington and tried to give them the intimate, high-level attention afforded to the leaders of Britain orFrance or China. The purpose was to have a separate deal with Pakistan to exit the war.Karzai, on the other hand, conveyed to the US, `Either you are with us forever or I make a deal with Pakistan.` By `forever` he meant, `We want the same relationship as Israel`, or at least the same as Egypt and South Korea.In short, there was no effort to bring the Taliban, the US, the government of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the united purpose of peace unlike what was done while negotiating the Vietnam peace.President Trump has his eyes fixed on fulfilling his campaign promise to bring US troops home in time for the 2020 US presidential election. But the secretly-called meeting at Camp David with the Taliban would have cast a shadow on his electoral prospects. He still calls Afghanistan a `university for terrorists`. Is he going to leave the university intact and flourishing, or return at some later opportune date to finish the unfinished agenda of lasting peace? The road ahead is full of craters and ditches, but if he leaves in the Soviet Union mode, it will be his revenge on the Afghan people.  The writer is a former civil servant and former minister raufkkhattak@gmail.com |  |