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John Kerry's Islamabad Visit: A Possible Thaw?

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Abstract

With a new government in place in Islamabad and with the United States needing Pakistan's help in winding down its operations in Afghanistan, there is some hope that relations between the two countries can be restored to some kind of normalcy. This was the expectation that took the US Secretary of State John Kerry on a two-day visit to Islamabad on 30-31 July 2013. Judging by the statements made by the two sides, it appears that the downward slide in relations that began in January 2011 has been arrested but much remains to be done. This paper explores what was achieved during the Kerry visit and what kind of trajectory the two countries are likely to follow as they move forward.

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John Kerry was familiar with his principal interlocutors in Islamabad. He had met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during the many visits he made to the country before taking up the position of Secretary of State in the second Obama administration. He had visited Sharif at his residence at Raiwind near Lahore. Sartaj Aziz, the Prime Minister's Special Advisor for External Affairs and National Security, was well-known to Kerry since he had served as Foreign Minister in the second Sharif administration. Kerry called on General Ashfaq Kayani during his earlier visits especially when he was sent by President Obama to secure the release of Raymond Davis, a Central Intelligence Agency operative who had killed two Pakistani young men in broad daylight on a busy Lahore street. It was the "Raymond Davis" incident in January 2011 that had sent relations between Washington and Islamabad spiralling downwards.

There were several items on the agendas drawn up by the two sides. The Americans went to Islamabad with three concerns. Pakistan had many more. Washington wanted Pakistan to make the American pullout from Afghanistan less troublesome for them. This meant that Islamabad had to move on a number of different fronts. The easiest of these was for Islamabad to keep its communication network open and operational while a large amount of heavy equipment they had accumulated in the country over a period of a decade was pulled out. According to some estimates this equipment was worth \$60 billion and the cost of taking it back home was about \$6 billion. While Islamabad was happy to help it was concerned that the movement of heavy vehicles would do serious damage to the Pakistani roads. It wanted Washington to provide Pakistan with the resources that would be needed to keep the system operational.

America's Prime Concern

Most important for the American side was the continuous harassing of their troops by the militant groups who operated from the Pakistani side of the Afghan border. The activities of the Haqqani group that had a sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal agency of North Waziristan were especially worrying for the United States. Washington had been pressuring Islamabad for years to move against this group. According to an account by David Sanger in his recent book *Confront and Conceal*, the Obama administration had gone to the extent of giving an ultimatum to Pakistan that if an operation carried out by the Haqqanis caused American deaths, Washington would move its troops into North Waziristan in an effort aimed at taking out the camps used by the group for training and mounting attacks.²

Pakistan had resisted this pressure in the belief that in post-America Afghanistan, the Haqqanis would of help to protect its strategic interests in its north-western neighbour. The only solution to this conflict of interests was to provide Pakistan with a seat at the table as Afghanistan's political future was discussed in the promised negotiations between the

² David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, New York, Broadway Books, 2013, p. 23.

warring sides – the government in Kabul led by President Hamid Karzai and the main Taliban group headed by the Pakistan-based leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar. The attempts to begin negotiations got stalled in June when the Taliban gave the indication that the office they were allowed to open in Doha, the capital of Qatar, would be used as a quasi-embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name they had given to their country when they governed for five years (1996-2001). This was acceptable neither to the government in Kabul nor indeed to Washington. Kerry wanted Pakistan to help out with Mullah Omar's group, implying that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the country's premier spy agency, had considerable influence with the former ruler (Emir) of Afghanistan. Islamabad was not prepared to acknowledge that it maintained a working relationship with the group.

The second issue for the American team was the use of drones as the weapon of choice by Washington in the various conflicts in which it was now involved. Initially Pakistan had agreed to this strategy to the extent of allowing the Americans to build a base from which these unmanned vehicles could be operated. The base was located at Shamsi, in the province of Baluchistan. Islamabad ordered the closing of the base as its relations with the United States deteriorated in 2011 to the point that a number of tit-for-tat policies were adopted by the two sides. In the campaign leading up to the elections of May 2013, the use of drones and the civilian casualties that had been caused by them had become an active issue. Nawaz Sharif in his campaign promised that if he came to power he would have the Americans stop their drone operations. He reiterated this policy stance in his first speech to the National Assembly after being sworn in as Prime Minister.

The Drone Dilemma

Pakistan has borne the brunt of the drone war. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, drone strikes had killed 3,136 people between 2004 and 2012, mostly in Pakistan's tribal areas. Among those were 555 civilians, including 185 children. The Washington-based New America Foundation also keeps a count of the attacks. According to it, the peak of the operation aimed at Pakistan was in 2010 when the tribal areas were struck 122 times. The number of strikes began to decline after this peak. There were 73 in 2011 and 48 in 2012.³ There were only 16 strikes in 2013 up to the time of the Kerry visit.⁴ It was not clear whether this decline was because of the Pakistani concerns or because the United States had run out of high-value targets. In a speech in April 2013, President Barack Obama laid down a new policy for the use of drones, indicating that the use would be restricted. Pakistan's tribal areas, he said, would continue to be targeted. In an interview to a Pakistani TV channel, Kerry seemed to indicate that the "drone war" on Pakistan would soon be over. "I believe that we're on a good track. I think the program will end as we have eliminated most of the threat". Asked if the United States had a "timeline" for the ending the drone strikes, Kerry said: "Well, I think so. And I think the President has a very real timeline, and

³ New America Foundation, "The Drone War in Pakistan", 8 July, 2013, Washington DC.

⁴ Matthew Lee, "Kerry in Pakistan to discuss drones and Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 31 July, 2013, p. A11.

we hope it is going to be very, very soon”. But he did not specify what the timeline was. A State Department statement issued later clarified what the Secretary wanted to indicate. “Today the Secretary referred to the changes that we expect to take place in that program over the course of time, but there is no exact timeline to provide”.⁵ A couple of days after Secretary Kerry left Pakistan, a drone attack killed two motorcycle riders in North Waziristan, drawing a rebuke from Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Addressing a meeting of businessmen in Faisalabad, he said that the United States must respect Pakistan’s sovereignty and stop all attacks immediately.

John Kerry was also interested in having Pakistan move decisively against the various groups that had taken up arms against the Pakistani state, using extreme forms of violence to pursue their interests. Washington, fearing that some of these groups could target its assets across the globe wanted Islamabad to move against those who were particularly opposed to the United States. Once again the Taliban and the Haqqanis were of special interest for the Americans. While Islamabad shared the US’s concerns about domestic terrorism, the new administration was still engaged in finding the right balance between negotiations and the use of force. The terrorist groups were testing the resolve of the government headed by Nawaz Sharif. In the two months since he had assumed office, dozens of attacks were launched by several different groups claiming more than 200 lives.

Pakistan’s IMF Imperative

High on the Pakistani agenda was the help the United States could give the country so that it could pull out of the economic recession that had lasted nearly six years – the longest in its history. Washington had been a major provider of assistance to Pakistan. It had also helped the country with the international financial and development institutions. Islamabad had concluded the first phase of discussions with the International Monetary Fund in June. The institution’s staff was planning to go to its board for an Extended Fund Facility programme that would provide the country with more than \$5 billion of long-term assistance. The Pakistanis also took up with Secretary Kerry the question of sluggish disbursements from the amounts the United States had committed to Pakistan under a bill he had piloted through the US Congress. Called the Kerry-Lugar-Bergman Bill it was signed into law by President Obama in October 2009. Its aim was to provide Pakistan with \$4.5 billion grants at the rate of \$1.5 billion a year over a period of five years. Since in the American financial system the executive branch proposes while the legislature disposes, funds had not flowed from Washington to Islamabad at the envisaged pace. Pakistan was not a popular country on Capitol Hill.

There were two concrete outcomes of the Kerry visit. He delivered an invitation to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on behalf of President Obama, to visit Washington. The two sides also

⁵ Michael M. Gordon, “Kerry in Pakistan expresses optimism on ending drone strikes soon”, *The New York Times*, 31 July, 2013, p. 11.

agreed to resume the strategic dialogue between the two capitals that was suspended when relations soured in 2011-12. There was an expectation that the items covered in the talks in Islamabad would receive more thorough treatment in the revived dialogue. Kerry seemed to link the resumption of the strategic dialogue with Pakistan to greater effort by Islamabad against the terrorists operating in the country. “Choice for Pakistan is clear”, he told the press: “It would be very unfortunate if the forces of violent extremism be allowed to grow more dominantly, overpowering the moderate majority. Addressing the threat by cross-border militancy is a key aspect of our strategic dialogue”.⁶

The importance Kerry had attached to efforts by Pakistan to curb extremism was underscored by the attack carried out by a group of militants on a jail in Dera Ismail Khan, a city in south Punjab on the province’s border with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The attack took place on the eve of Kerry’s visit and led to the freeing of hundreds of prisoners including some Taliban who were serving jail-terms for carrying out terrorist activities in the country. About the same time as the attack in Dera Ismail Khan, there were also attacks on the jails in Iraq and Afghanistan also leading to the release of prisoners. There was some speculation in the Western press whether these were coordinated operations linked with Al Qaeda and were the reason why the United States issued a high alert to its citizens travelling in many parts of the Muslim world. Washington also took the extraordinary step of closing 22 of its embassies around the globe on 4 August, indicating that the “chatter” it had picked up on the various communication channels pointed to the possibility of an attack on that day.

Since the primary purpose of the talks was to produce a thaw in relations, Secretary Kerry’s visit can be termed as successful. The American side took note of the fact that Prime Minister Sharif, a devout Muslim, had postponed his visit to Mecca by a day to accommodate Kerry’s schedule. The Mecca visit, coming during the last ten days of the holy month of Ramadan, held special significance for the Pakistani chief executive.

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⁶ Quoted in Baqir Sajjad, “US agrees to revive strategic ties, but with a caveat”, Dawn, 2 August, 2013, p.1.