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The Rapidly Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Some Hope but Considerable Despair

There is a combination of hope and despair about the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan. There is hope because of a fairly fundamental change in the thinking of the various countries that have interest in Afghanistan. Washington and Kabul need to rethink their approach towards the conflict. Both capitals must find a way of bringing Pakistan to their side. Perhaps the most important change is in the thinking about this 17-year conflict is in Washington. This is on the part of the military leaders in the United States whose thinking does not always match that of Donald Trump, the country's president. This paper examines where the various players in the game stand.

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The United States (US) has reached the conclusion that, in spite its military might, it will not be able to beat back the Taliban insurgency by using only force. Something other than

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that would be required. The only thing that is likely to work is a negotiated settlement. It has now in place a new commander who has a long experience of service in Afghanistan. Lieutenant General Austin Scott Miller, 57, was among the first batch of soldiers to land in Afghanistan when, in October 2001, US President George W Bush ordered the invasion of the country. Bush held the Taliban regime, then in power in Kabul, responsible for facilitating the 9/11 terrorist attacks on his country. Miller has spent much of his career involved with the Special Operations Forces engaged in Afghanistan. For the last couple of years, he has worked closely with the Afghan military teams fighting not only the Taliban, but also the Islamic State that is gaining ground in the country. He fully understands the limitations of the Afghan fighting force.

Miller took over the command of the allied forces from General John W Nicholson, 61, who had served the longest of all US military leaders in that position. “The change of command is traditionally a time of reflection and security for the U.S. military role here”, wrote *The Washington Post’s* Pamela Constable in her story about the event. “Miller is arriving at a moment of fresh questions in Washington about the role and duration of the U.S. military commitment, confusion about the intentions of the Taliban, and growing doubts about the Afghan government’s leadership and internal cohesiveness, in relation to both security policies and political dealings.”² In mentioning internal cohesiveness, Constable was referring to the sudden departure of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani’s national security adviser, Hanif Atmar. That happened because of the differences that had developed between the adviser and some senior members of the Ghani administration.³

The Afghan President recalled his young ambassador to Washington to fill the vacated position. Hamdullah Mohib, 35, is a trusted lieutenant of Ghani, having served as his Deputy Chief of Staff before being sent to Washington to represent Kabul. He was in the President’s office when the author visited Ghani in Kabul in May 2016 and worked out the logistics of stay. The author will have more to say about that visit a little later in the

² Pamela Constable, “U.S. command change in Afghanistan comes at uncertain time”, *The Washington Post*, 3 September 2018. <http://bangordailynews.com/2018/09/02/news/world-news/us-military-command-changes-hands-in-afghanistan/>, Accessed on 4 September 2018.

³ Ibid.

paper. Having grown up in Quetta and Peshawar, Mohib knows and understands Pakistan well and is likely to have considerable influence over the making of Afghanistan's Pakistan policy.

The other important change in the cast of characters is in Pakistan where Imran Khan is now the prime minister. During the author's day and a half stay in Kabul, he spent several hours one-on-one with Ghani. Their careers at the World Bank had overlapped and, at one point, the author had asked Ghani to do some work for him when the author was the Vice President in charge of the Bank's programme in Latin America and the Caribbean. At the author's request, he had developed a plan of action to be followed by Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru who were having problems managing their common borders. Ghani and his team came up with a solution that was accepted and implemented by the three countries. "Why can't we do something similar involving Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan," Ghani suggested to the author in a telephone call and invited the author to visit him in Kabul to discuss that possibility.

However, the author's long conversation with Ghani over dinner at one of the Presidential Palaces focused more on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. He was very troubled by what he thought was the lack of interest in Pakistan to get the Taliban to opt for peace rather than war. In that context, the author reminded him of the conversation they had when he was leaving the World Bank to join the government headed by President Hamid Karzai. The author's suggestion then was that Afghanistan and Pakistan should work together to develop the tribal belts on both sides of the border. This was the area where the Pakhtun population lived, mostly in poverty. The lack of economic progress in this area, coupled with high rates of population growth, had resulted in despair on the part of the young population. There was an urgent need to satisfy the aspirations of the tribal youth. They had lost faith in their future and this was the reason the tribal belts had become the catchment areas for the insurgent groups on both sides of the border.

Ghani had bought the argument then and was inclined to work on it but was very concerned about the deteriorating security situation in his country when the author visited him in Kabul. That notwithstanding, he said he would be happy to discuss this approach with Khan, whose party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, ran the government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa on the Pakistani side of the border. He asked the author to invite Khan on his behalf to visit him in Kabul.

Upon the author's return to Islamabad, he passed on the Ghani invitation to Khan. His initial reaction was that he had to be careful since he had built up a position of trust with the Taliban who were active on the Pakistani side of the border. That had happened because of his strong opposition to the use of drones as the weapon of choice by the Americans. These unmanned vehicles had done a lot of collateral damage in the tribal areas on both sides of the border, killing hundreds of women and children in the process. After a long conversation, Khan agreed to accept the invitation but a trip to Kabul did not materialise.

Ghani asked his then-Ambassador Mohib to get in touch with the author and get him back to Kabul to help resolve Ghani's differences with the leaders in Pakistan. While, he did not seem to have much of a problem with the civilian leaders, Ghani was finding it hard to get the needed cooperation from the Pakistan army high command. The author and Ghani met twice over lunch, the second time joined by Jalil Jilani, Pakistan's Ambassador in Washington. Through the Afghan Ambassador, the author and Jilani advised Ghani to establish a direct line of communication with the army leadership. There did not seem to be complete understanding between the civilians in Islamabad and the military in Rawalpindi. That was likely to change with Khan in power. Most analysts believe that the military is much more comfortable working with Khan than was the case with Nawaz Sharif, the former Pakistan president. This is the second reason why there is some hope of finding a way out of the Afghan quagmire. Ghani called Khan after the latter became prime minister and expressed his wish for the two to work together to bring peace to the long war-torn country.

Another change that will have consequences for the Afghan story is what some analysts have called the ‘Bajwa doctrine’. General Qamar Bajwa is the Chief of the Army Staff in Pakistan and has taken a view about his country’s relations with the US in the context of the war in Afghanistan. According to an assessment published by the Royal and written by Kamal Alam, a visiting fellow, “In their own words, Pakistan’s generals lay out the ‘Bajwa Doctrine’ – their vision that for the future of the US-military cooperation in the age of President Trump. From their perspective, Pakistan has done enough to secure neighbouring Afghanistan and is not intimidated by the threat of US funding cuts.”⁴

However, would the US be able to keep the Khan administration on its side? While recognising that Islamabad, under Khan, could play an important role to get the Taliban insurgents to the negotiating table and also in developing the substance of the agreement, it is puzzling how the Trump administration is approaching Pakistan. The fact that Washington announced, a couple of days before the visit by Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State, to Islamabad, the suspension of US\$300 million (S\$413.4 million) payment that was owed Pakistan is a good indication of the poor coordination of policies related to Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was a poor follow up when Trump publicly asserted that America had been rewarded with “nothing but lies and deceit” for “foolishly” giving Pakistan more than US\$33 billion (US\$45.7 billion) in aid in the last 15 years. “They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!” Trump wrote in January, in his first tweet of the year 2018.⁵ It is not clear how this could possibly deliver Pakistan to the American side. “Mr. Khan has all the incentives to avoid a complete bust up in the talks today,” wrote Jonathan Eyal, in his report in *The Straits Times* published on the day Khan and Pompeo were set to meet. “And so the Americans who, despite their confrontational tone, know that a completely hostile Pakistan could be a much bigger headache than the country is now”.⁶

⁴ Kamal Aslam, “The Bajwa Doctrine: The Pakistan Military has done more than enough”, Royal United Services Institute, *Newsbrief*, Volume 38, No.1, September 2018.

⁵ Haroon Janjua, “Nothing but lies and deceit: Trump launches Twitter attack on Pakistan”, *The Guardian*, 1 January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/01/lies-and-deceit-trump-launches-attack-on-pakistan-tweet>. Accessed on 4 September 2018.

⁶ Jonathan Eyal, “US, Pakistan seek to reset confrontational relations”, *The Straits Times*, 5 September 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/us-pakistan-seek-to-reset-confrontational-relations>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

How Pakistan could help was the subject of the discussion Pompeo had with Khan during a short stopover in Islamabad on his way to New Delhi for talks with the Indian leadership. The talks with India were within the framework of what are called “two-by-two” discussions. These involve Ministers of External Affairs and Defense of India and the Secretaries of State and Defense from the US. The New Delhi talks were aimed at bringing India closer to the US’ position relating to what Washington now calls the Indo-Pacific Area. This development is not viewed favourably in Islamabad which is now aligning itself even more closely with China.

Nothing of substance seems to have been achieved by the Pompeo visit other than the declarations by both sides that the talks were cordial. In keeping with the ‘Bajwa Doctrine’, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi told the press that he chose not to mention the US\$300 million (S\$413.4 million) suspension of payments by the US to Pakistan. As the newspaper *Dawn* wrote in its report on the Pompeo-Khan meeting, “The inclusion of newly appointed adviser on Afghanistan Zalmay Kahlilzad, who has been hostile towards Pakistan and is also unacceptable to the Taliban, in the Pompeo-led delegation raises questions about the US seriousness about reaching a political settlement in Afghanistan.”⁷ There is still a long way to go before the US has a well-defined approach in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the Afghan situation is deteriorating rapidly as the Taliban becomes impatient with the government in Kabul.

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⁷ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Pakistan, US agree to make fresh start”, *Dawn*, 5 September 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1431263>. Accessed on 6 September 2018.