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Michael Pompeo in Pakistan: A Resetting of Relations

The United States (US) Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, made his first official trip to Pakistan on 5 September 2018 to meet with its new Prime Minister, Imran Khan, and his team with the aim of resetting the increasingly bitter relationship between the two long-time security partners over Pakistan's alleged failure to curb militancy; its ever-closer alliance with China, an emerging friendship with Iran and Russia; and the US' growing strategic and economic ties with India. While neither of the two nations can afford a complete rupture in their relations, Afghanistan remains central to any improvement.

Nazneen Mohsina¹

The United States (US) Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, visited Islamabad on 5 September 2018 to discuss issues of mutual interests with Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan and his team. The talks between the American and Pakistani officials focused on two major issues: efforts to reset relations between the two nations and Pakistan's support for the US-led reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

Following his meeting, Pompeo told reporters, "We talked about their new government, the opportunity to reset the relationship between our two countries across a broad spectrum –

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economic, business, and commercial.”² He added, “We all know that we need to try and develop a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan, which benefits certainly Afghanistan, but also the United States and Pakistan.”³ According to the US Department of State, “In all of his meetings, Secretary Pompeo emphasized the important role Pakistan could play in bringing about a negotiated peace in Afghanistan, and conveyed the need for Pakistan to take sustained and decisive measures against terrorists and militants threatening regional peace and stability.”⁴ Though Pompeo said, “I’m hopeful that the foundation that we laid today will set the conditions for continued success as we start to move forward”, he also made it clear there was “a long way to go, lots more discussion to be had”.⁵ The appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the new US Special Adviser on Afghan reconciliation could also complicate matters, considering his unpopularity in Pakistan, due to his harsh criticism of the country.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi will meet Pompeo again in Washington later in September 2018, after attending the United Nations General Assembly. He assured the US of support in the US’ efforts to seek peaceful reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, he also cautioned that if the US wants Pakistan to focus on its western border with Afghanistan, it would need to help ease tension on its eastern border with India.⁶

Pompeo’s visit to Pakistan was marred by a controversy over a telephonic conversation between the Pakistan Prime Minister and Pompeo on 23 August 2018 when the two sides issued conflicting statements about terrorist operations in Pakistan. While the US State Department claimed to have highlighted Pompeo’s expectations of Pakistan doing more to counter terrorism in Afghanistan, Qureshi denied any discussion on terrorists in Pakistan. After Washington sent the full transcript of the conversation to Pakistan, debunking the Pakistani assertion, Pakistan chose to step back, “We would want the episode to

² “Pompeo upbeat on ‘reset’ with Pakistan after meeting new PM Khan”, *Channel News Asia*, 5 September 2018. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/pompeo-upbeat-on--reset--with-pakistan-after-meeting-new-pm-khan-10686866>. Accessed on 6 September 2018.

³ “Pakistan PM ‘Optimistic’ After Brief Talks With Pompeo”, *The New York Times*, 5 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/09/05/world/asia/ap-as-pompeo.html>. Accessed on 6 September 2018.

⁴ Heather Nauert, “Secretary Pompeo’s Meetings in Pakistan”, 5 September 2018, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/09/285708.htm>. Accessed on 6 September 2018.

⁵ “Pakistan PM ‘Optimistic’ After Brief Talks With Pompeo”, *The New York Times*, op. cit.

⁶ “To Ease Tensions With India, Pakistan Seeks US Help”, *NDTV*, 6 September 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/to-ease-tensions-with-india-pakistan-seeks-us-help-1912025>. Accessed on 7 September 2018.

end...politically, we need to move on”, Foreign Office spokesman Dr Muhammad Faisal said.⁷

Additionally, days before Pompeo’s visit, Khan, Qureshi and several senior Pakistani officials met with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Iran’s Ambassador to Pakistan Mehdi Honardoost and other members of the Iranian delegation.⁸ The meeting called for expansion of relations in various spheres, including resuming the long-stalled Iran-Pakistan natural gas pipeline project. Pakistan also supported Iran’s “principled stance” on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, upsetting the US.⁹ A recent US decision to stop US\$300 million (S\$413.4 million) payment to Pakistan under the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) has further troubled the relationship between the two nations. Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Kone Faulkner has said that the decision has been taken due to a lack of “Pakistani decisive actions in support of the South Asia Strategy”.¹⁰ With this, the amount of funds halted under the CSF has gone up to US\$800 million (S\$1.1 billion). Pakistan cautiously reacted to the US cancellation of payment, contending that the money is not an “assistance rather reimbursements” for partaking in the US-led global war on terror. “This is not an aid. This is our money that we have spent in the fight against terrorism”, Qureshi insisted.¹¹

Pakistan-US ties have been bitter for some time due to differences over Afghanistan, the presence of militants in Pakistan, the growth of strategic and economic ties between the US and India, and Pakistan’s tilt towards China. In January 2018, US President Donald Trump accused Pakistan of giving sanctuary to terrorists and extending the war in Afghanistan - a charge Islamabad denied. Thereafter, the US suspended security assistance worth more than

⁷ “FO wants to draw a line under Imran-Pompeo phone controversy”, *Dawn*, 31 August 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1430052>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

⁸ “Iranian Foreign Minister's offer to PM Imran Khan”, *Times of Islamabad*, 31 August 2018, <https://timesofislamabad.com/31-Aug-2018/iranian-foreign-minister-s-offer-to-pm-imran-khan>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

⁹ “Pakistan stands by Iran on nuclear deal issue”, *The Express Tribune*, 31 August 2018. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1792391/1-pakistan-stands-iran-nuclear-deal-issue/>. Accessed on 4 September 2018.

¹⁰ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, “Exclusive: Pentagon cancels aid to Pakistan over record on militants”, Reuters, 2 September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-military-exclusive/exclusive-pentagon-cancels-aid-to-pakistan-over-record-on-militants-idUSKCN1LH3TA>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

¹¹ Kamran Yousaf, “It’s not aid, US owes money to Pakistan in CSF: Qureshi”, *The Express Tribune*, 2 September 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1793667/1-suspension-300m-csf-taken-pompeo-visit-qureshi/>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

US\$1.15 billion (S\$1.58 billion) to Pakistan for the latter's failure to take 'decisive actions' against terrorism, particularly the Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban.¹²

Afghanistan has been a major cause for the troubled relations between Pakistan and the US. The former has been accused of giving "safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror".¹³ The US wants to expedite its exit from Afghanistan after more than 16 years of war which cost it billions of dollars and more than 2,300 American lives.¹⁴ As an absolute victory against the Taliban is now almost ruled out, the necessity for a negotiated settlement is felt more than ever before. In February 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani appealed to the Taliban "to enter into a peace process without preconditions – an unprecedented gesture by the Afghan government".¹⁵ In June 2018, Taliban chief Hibatullah Akhundzada released a statement seeking direct dialogues with the US – a round of which was held in Doha in July 2018. Thereafter, both the US and the Taliban have been trying to maximise their clout on the battleground to win greater leverage at the negotiating table.

Pakistan's potential ability to facilitate dialogue with the Taliban is considered pivotal. Khan is alleged to have close links with the Taliban. He acquired the moniker "Taliban Khan" because of his constant criticism of the US' war-on-terror policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan's blind support for it, and his repeated calls for engagement and a political settlement with the Taliban that would give the group a share of the government in Afghanistan. If talking to the Taliban was taboo until recently, it is now seen by many as the only way forward to peace in Afghanistan. Hence, Khan might now find himself in quite a valuable position to advance reconciliation with the Taliban. Pakistan's role in the temporary ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Taliban during Eid this year demonstrated its significance to the peace-building efforts. According to Senior Bureau Official for South

¹² "US suspends over \$1.1 bn security assistance to Pakistan", *The Hindu*, 5 January 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-suspends-over-11-bn-security-assistance-to-pakistan/article22372751.ece>. Accessed on 4 September 2018.

¹³ "Trump threatens to cut aid to Pakistan, calls it a haven for terrorists", *The Straits Times*, 2 January 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/trump-threatens-to-cut-aid-to-pakistan-a-haven-to-terrorists>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

¹⁴ "Statement for the Record by Ambassador Alice G. Wells Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee", 20 June 2018, US House of Representatives, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20180620/108448/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-WellsA-20180620.pdf>. Accessed on 4 September 2018.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

and Central Asian Affairs, Ambassador Alice G Wells, “Pakistan has an important role to play and has legitimate interests that it wants to ensure are met during any peace process”.¹⁶

The settlement in Afghanistan is a huge opportunity for Pakistan to “end its international isolation”, a foreign policy agenda expressed by Qureshi. The country is confronting a number of major challenges on its external affairs front. Its relationship with the West is at the lowest ebb while its perpetual rivalry and tension on the Line of Control with India seems interminable. Pakistan’s blame-game with Afghanistan has also become a recurring affair, regardless of the launch of Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity in May 2018. Following the recent surge in violence, especially after the Ghazni attack,¹⁷ Ghani alleged that the militants were backed by Pakistan. “Gen Bajwa, you signed a document with us and told me repeatedly in our conversations over the phone that when elections [in Pakistan] are over, you will pay attention to it. I need answers now...From where they came and why are they receiving treatment in your hospitals?”, he questioned.¹⁸ Pakistan refuted the assertion, highlighting the visit by Afghans to Pakistani hospitals for treatment is a common occurrence. A day before Pompeo’s visit, Pakistan and Afghanistan decided to clear misunderstandings and improve their relations during a telephone conversation between Qureshi and his Afghan counterpart, Salahuddin Rabbani.¹⁹

Pakistan is also facing an impending balance of payment crisis, with dwindling foreign-exchange reserves. Averting the crisis would require loans from abroad, according to most analysts. However, the country failed to convince the Financial Action Task Force, the global financial watchdog, to remove it from the ‘Grey List’, thereby hampering foreign direct investment and foreign portfolio investment into the country. The International Monetary Fund, which has bailed Pakistan out numerous times in recent decades, is an option. However, the US, its chief sponsor, has voiced apprehensions about fund money being used to settle Pakistan’s debt with China for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and it could dictate strict terms. Nonetheless, objective conditions necessitate change. The internal

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ On 10 August 2018, Taliban fighters launched an attack on the eastern provincial capital of Afghanistan, Ghazni, killing more than 200 soldiers and civilians. They also destroyed communications towers, and cut power and water supplies before government forces pushed them back with the help of US air strikes five days later.

¹⁸ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Kabul told to look inwards for Ghazni attack causes”, *Dawn*, 18 August 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1427714>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

¹⁹ Shafqat Ali, “A tense Pakistan-US dialogue today” 5 September 2018, *The Nation*, <https://nation.com.pk/05-Sep-2018/a-tense-pakistan-us-dialogue-today>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

dynamics in Pakistan make it imperative for change in Pakistan's foreign policy. Consequently, the country needs to repair ties with the US to not only secure the bailout package, but also to create room to negotiate with China. However, like both Khan and Qureshi asserted, the US-Pakistan relationship must be revived on the principles of mutual respect and equality.

In his victory speech, Khan also sought to improve Pakistan's relations with its neighbours – India and Afghanistan. “Afghanistan's people need peace. We want peace there. If there is peace in Afghanistan, there will be peace in Pakistan. We will make every effort to achieve peace there”, Khan avowed.²⁰ To boost ties with India, he prescribed trade and dialogue. He also proclaimed that “if [India] steps one step forward, [Pakistan] will take two steps forward”.²¹

However, Pakistan's foreign policy is widely perceived to be subservient to its powerful military establishment. Hence, Khan's independence and decision-making power in this regard may be limited. Indeed, Khan met Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Chief of Pakistani Army a day before his meeting with Pompeo. According to a brief statement released by the Prime Minister's Office, “matters related to security were discussed.”²² Bajwa was also present during the US-Pakistan meeting. Nevertheless, Qureshi tried to dispel this impression and asserted that “there are pre-conceived notions about where the foreign policy of Pakistan was formulated. Let me be clear: the foreign policy will be made here – at the Foreign Office of Pakistan”.²³ While this might be true, past governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, his daughter Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif suggest scepticism.²⁴ However, Khan might bring a personal agency to the table, given his charisma, ability to orate, wide popularity and good reputation.

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²⁰ “Imran Khan's speech in full”, 26 July 2018, Al-Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/imran-khan-speech-full-180726124850706.html>. Accessed on 5 September 2018.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa called on Prime Minister Imran Khan at PM Office”, *Prime Minister's Office, Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 3 September 2018. http://www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=2422. Accessed on 4 September 2018.

²³ “‘Pakistan first’ at the core of new foreign policy, asserts Shah Mahmood Qureshi”, *Dawn*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1428173/pakistan-first-at-the-core-of-new-foreign-policy-asserts-shah-mahmood>. Accessed on 5 September 2018,

²⁴ While Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged by General Zia-ul-Haq, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. Nawaz Sharif has been reduced to a cipher in prison.