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Karzai's Diplomacy of Hopes and Wishes

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Speaking to reporters before leaving Kabul for Islamabad towards the end of August 2013, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai sounded resigned when he said: "I will travel to Pakistan hoping to get a result out of it. I'm hopeful, but not sure, I will only go with hopes; and wish they materialise".

Mr Karzai's 20th trip to Pakistan since 2002, the first in 18 months and the first since Nawaz Sharif assumed office as its Prime Minister for the third time, came when Afghanistan is in the process of an important political and security transition. Afghan presidential election, which Mr Karzai cannot contest due to term limits, is scheduled for April 2014. The United States' troops-withdrawal, announced for the end of 2014, will then follow. In between he faces the challenging question of how many troops the US can leave behind and under what conditions. The residual forces will continue to be a source of military conflict amongst various factions of Afghans. While the current dispensation survives because of the presence of foreign forces, Afghan resistance in the shape of Taliban wants them out.

In addition, the never-comfortable relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, each country vital for peace in the other and in the wider region, have been getting strained in the recent past. While earlier Afghanistan, overlooking the fact that same tribes straddle a historic non-

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border, accused Pakistan of providing sanctuaries to the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan too now regularly accuses Afghanistan of harbouring the Pakistani Taliban.

Kabul Places Onus on Pakistan

“The first item with Pakistan will be the peace negotiations”, Mr Karzai told a news conference in Kabul before leaving for Pakistan. Praising Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for having “all the right intentions for stability and peace”, Mr Karzai complained still that his previous visits had not achieved the goal of improving security in his country.

Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of playing a double game in the 12-year-old war by making pronouncements about peace but turning the other way when elements of its military allegedly play a spoiling role.

Mr Karzai has insisted many times that Taliban’s alleged safe havens in Pakistan are the main cause of increased violence in his country. Little does he realise that 40 per cent of Pashtuns, the main Afghan tribe, live in Pakistan across a porous border called Durand Line that was drawn in its present form only in 1893 and has remained unrecognised by the subsequent Afghan governments.

In June 2013, when the Doha talks with the Taliban failed to take off, Mr Karzai’s chief of staff claimed that the nature of the Taliban office was a plot to break up Afghanistan as orchestrated by Pakistan or the US. In a complete misreading of the situation, Afghan General Sher Mohammad Karimi alleged in July that Pakistan could end the war in Afghanistan “in weeks” if it were serious about peace.

Perhaps, to put Pakistan on the back-foot, the Afghan side later publicly announced the main points of the agenda it wanted to discuss while Mr Karzai was in Pakistan. Seeking to explore cooperation in the security and economic fields and push the peace process forward, Kabul demanded “Pakistan’s practical steps” to convince the Taliban to directly talk to the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC), a government-appointed body.

Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan Umar Daudzai was more explicit. “We say that if you can facilitate a contact between the Taliban and the United States, you can also facilitate a contact between the Afghan government and the Taliban”, said Mr Daudzai in Islamabad before Mr Karzai’s arrival. Mr Daudzai was made Minister for Interior soon after Mr Karzai returned to Kabul.

Mr Karzai landed in Islamabad, publicly hoping to get some Afghan prisoners released, something that could help the peace process. This actually meant the release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban Chief Strategist, held in Pakistan since 2010 when he was suspected of covert contacts with Kabul officials.

Since several Taliban activists released earlier by Pakistan had reportedly returned to the battlefield, the expectation that the release of more such activists would facilitate the peace process seemed exaggerated.

Accent on ‘Afghan-Led’ Initiative

At the joint press conference after an hour-long meeting with Mr Sharif, Mr Karzai raised the issue of all Afghan prisoners in detention in Pakistan “without any judicial orders” and of those “whose release can benefit the peace process”. However, Mr Sharif only reaffirmed Pakistan’s strong and sincere support for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. “We fully agreed that this process has to be inclusive, Afghan-owned and Afghan-led”, he added. Mr Sharif also promised Pakistan’s support for regional efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. While there was no finger-pointing at the press conference, the emphasis of the two leaders was starkly different.

The Afghan President, many insiders claim, had pinned hopes on a breakthrough in the release of some Afghan prisoners like Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar who could then be flown out to Afghanistan in the glare of international media spotlight. This would have won Mr Karzai kudos back home. Even though he extended his visit by a day these hopes did not materialise.

“Afghan-owned” and “Afghan-led” also mean different to the Taliban who believe that the Karzai government is a US-installed puppet. Any discussion with the HPC amounts to his recognition, which they are not prepared for.

Expressing disappointment at the outcome of the visit, Barhan Osman of Afghanistan Analysts Network, an Afghan think tank, commented: “The two leaders are not on the same page... it was not what the Afghans were looking for”.

Mr Karzai’s insistence on talking to the Taliban directly stems from two reasons: that he is fearful of a deal directly between the Americans and the Taliban in which he is jettisoned. And two, a direct conversation between his government or the HPC and the Taliban actually amounts to the recognition of his government by the Taliban. This is not acceptable to the Taliban.

Afghan attempts to use Pakistan as a channel with Taliban are not new. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is in Pakistan’s interest more than that of any other external country. This prolonged conflict has disfigured Pakistani society almost beyond recognition. Pakistan’s worst fears are a resumption of a ghastly civil war within Afghanistan after the US withdrawal when ‘*jihadis*’ will cross from Pakistan into Afghanistan to help their brethren and refugees will stream into Pakistan.

Living with such an insecurity psyche Pakistan wants to retain a degree of leverage in shaping the future government in Kabul which might at least be not hostile to its interests. Mr Karzai, whose first strategic agreement was with India followed by several more with other countries, is disinclined for one with Pakistan. His intentions, therefore, remain a suspect in the eyes of Pakistan's powerful military and civilian leaderships.

Mr Karzai is aware he is a figure fading away in history. So, the Americans have reasons to sign a deal with the Taliban without him, even if he is seen thwarting it, especially when they want their troops out of Afghanistan within the next 16 months. For now he seems to be walking a tightrope in negotiating with the Americans over a residual force to be left behind after the 2014 withdrawal and the Status of Forces Agreement. He has to offer a deal sweet enough for them so that chaos does not immediately ensue on their departure. His visit to Islamabad was also aimed at securing some kind of a deal where he could go out of the presidency with a degree of security and by leaving a legacy of a stable Afghanistan.

Policy circles in Islamabad view Mr Karzai's trip as an attempt that was to reignite the peace process which, after Kabul's own walkout in Doha, came to a halt. The expectation that Pakistan could get the Taliban to the negotiating table with the Karzai-appointed HPC was an inflated assessment of the degree of influence that Pakistan has had over the Taliban's decision-making. Cases of Pakistan's failed attempts to make the Taliban give up on the Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and desist from destroying the Bamiyan Buddha statues are well-known.

Taliban's Disdain

The Taliban, who were following Mr Karzai's Pakistan visit closely, have rhetorically dismissed any idea of a third-country involvement in the peace process. Pakistan remains involved, nonetheless, and has even hinted at an understanding to shift the venue of talks out of Doha.

The visit was also a test for the new government in Islamabad on how much its internal stakeholders were on board in dealing with the crucial issue of Afghanistan. The Murree luncheon for Mr Karzai on the extra day of his visit, attended by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff and Advisor on Foreign Affairs, confirmed that Mr Karzai received a message of unity from Islamabad.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have many shared interests relating to security and stability in each country. Both aspects are necessary for the recovery of their economies that could improve the lives of ordinary citizens and ensure regional peace. The leaderships of both these countries and others in the region need to appreciate mutual concerns and contribute to peace in this troubled area.

The registration for nominations for the Afghan presidential elections starts in Kabul in a few days. Mr Karzai's high expectations from his recently-concluded Pakistan trip, made public prior to his visit itself, have now been met, as evident in Pakistan's dramatic late-evening announcement on 10 September that an in-principle decision had been made to release Mullah Baradar. This would give Mr Karzai some leverage at home. The date of Mullah Baradar's handover to the Afghan authorities is yet to be announced. Pakistan released seven Taliban prisoners at the end of last week.

With the Afghan presidential clock beginning to tick, Kabul's engagement with Pakistan is crucial for the resolution of the impasse; and the results of Mr Karzai's Pakistan trip seem to have bought him some time. The big question, however, remains: given his time constraints, if his hopes are not realised quickly, how long will the Karzai-led Afghanistan and Pakistan stay on the same page in the lead-up to the critical times ahead?

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