



The US-Afghan Deal

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Pakistan is confronted with a slew of critical challenges. They include the slide towards climate catastrophe, on which there is an overwhelming scientific consensus that it will become irreversible by the end of the current decade. That is unless a whole range of large scale and expensive measures comprising a “green new deal” are implemented.

There is the more immediate challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic which could decimate whole populations around the world, including Pakistan, unless a vaccine is quickly developed and distributed. Meanwhile mass testing, mass quarantine and upgraded healthcare capabilities are needed immediately to minimize mass deaths until all aspects of the virus are understood, contained and effectively controlled. How long this will take, the experts say no one knows for sure.

At home the usual concerns remain with the quality of governance, functioning of institutions, and national and regional politics. At the same time, economic growth, job creation, delivery of basic services, and human resource development still need attention. Rational approaches to

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the solution of these existential challenges are precluded by power and political structures that systemically distort national priorities and ensure gross misallocation of resources. Meanwhile the population is on course towards 400 million by 2050.

Externally, Pakistan is immediately confronted by the fascist insanity that has taken hold of India which sees the very existence of the Muslims of Kashmir, India and, indeed, Pakistan as intolerable obstacles to the fulfillment of its destiny and glory as an exclusively Hindu superpower. In this context, the current situation in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) has the potential to develop into a genocidal situation which could spark significant conflict between India and Pakistan. Conflict escalation would not be without doomsday nuclear scenario, unless the international community can demonstrate the will to restrain the hate-driven lunatics at the helm of affairs in India.

This provides the context in which the current situation in Afghanistan needs to be assessed. Arguably, Afghanistan is the least of the challenges currently confronting Pakistan. However, the many threats already mentioned in no way reduce the priority of bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, along with a fundamentally improved bilateral relationship.

The February 29, 2020 “deal” between the US and the Taliban appeared to be a possible harbinger of peace. It was never too soon in a land devastated several times over by wars and civil wars over more than 40 years. These wars have also exacted a terrible price on Pakistan. Immediately upon signing, however, the deal began to unravel over the release of prisoners and the timing and modalities of a ceasefire. Accordingly, it is unclear whether the deal is stillborn. USA has been conveying inconsistent messages to the Taliban on the one hand, and Kabul on the other, jeopardizing the trust of both.

Kabul, moreover, has two parallel and mutually hostile governments for the moment. There are other stakeholders who answer to neither of the pretender governments. Who are the Taliban expected to engage with if they are serious about engaging with anyone in Kabul?

There is a real threat of a Pashtun versus non-Pashtun split in Afghanistan – a country that is 200 years older than Pakistan, and despite continuous external interference and sectarian and ethnic conflict has never had a secessionist movement since Amir Abdur Rahman consolidated the country.

Yet, despite the current mess, there is a war weariness throughout Afghanistan that could induce the parties to consider compromise. To the extent, the February 29 deal could yet prove to be a turning point towards relative peace, a lessening of the horrible sufferings of the Afghan people and the building of an essential minimum of trust and goodwill between Kabul and Islamabad.

For this to be possible a number of problems will need to be addressed. What is US policy? Does it really wish to get out of Afghanistan or is it designed to be a process that strengthens President Trump’s re-election bid? Could it be reversed in his second term if US strategic interests including residual forces and intelligence gathering bases in Afghanistan are not guaranteed by a political settlement?

The recent release of the Afghan Papers comprising reports of SIGAR (the Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction) has revealed the extent of systematic US dissimulation and equivocation about progress in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the strategic elite in Washington is not just concerned with Afghanistan. They are concerned with the larger question of limiting Russian and Chinese influence in the Eurasian heartland extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific on the one hand, and Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region traversing the Indian Ocean on the other. Toynbee regarded Afghanistan as one the most important “roundabouts” of history in the old world and along with Iran, Pakistan and the Central Asian states it could again be seen in a similar strategic context today. This further complicates the “untying of the Afghan knot.”

Other questions pertain to the Taliban. Can they maintain their unity and negotiate an understanding with the US that enables them to:

- a. Translate their battlefield resilience into a broader based political salience that does not alienate whole segments of the Afghan political spectrum as happened when they ruled from Kabul and Kandahar.
- b. Induce the US to progressively abandon its support for an adamant but fatally weakened Kabul regime. That regime is unwilling to concede the necessary political presence to the Taliban that could encourage them to progressively become part of a more democratic political process.
- c. Who is going to fund Afghan reconstruction, demobilization, disarming and rehabilitation (DDR), refugee return, and security sector reform (SSR) over the crucial post settlement decade?

On the face of it, it would be a brave person who pretends to have the answers to these questions.

What impact might the twin prospects of climate disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic have on the political situation in Afghanistan? One might speculate at length without being able to usefully answer this question. The tragedy of continued civil war, foreign military intervention and mass displacements could be superseded by an even greater tragedy of mass dying. A minimum of peace would be essential for Afghanistan to confront the pandemic with some chance of internationally aided success. This fact could conceivably

inform a political process and drive it towards some kind of acceptable and viable compromise.

To the extent that there is a link between global warming and epidemics and pandemics the current Covid-19 pandemic may be only the first of several pandemics in the offing. Populations will either trend towards the unsustainable or towards zero. Wars may become both irrelevant and inevitable. The parameters of human survival are being fundamentally altered before our eyes. The “hot spots” of the global map are being overwhelmed by an enveloping global hot spot. Only a new awareness of impending global trauma that is communicated to the billions of the planet can help transcend the profound barriers to rational thinking and survival policies. If this is considered a bridge too far then addressing specific issues such as Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine, Iraq, or Syria will become as irrelevant as the saving of organized human society becomes impossible.

But assuming the global worst is averted, what role can Pakistan play with regard to the current situation in Afghanistan? Pakistan in its present state will almost certainly not be able to play any seminal role in bringing peace to Afghanistan. However, if the heroic assumption is made that Pakistan can launch itself upon a path towards transforming itself, then opportunities to contribute towards regional stability including in Afghanistan will indeed emerge. In fact, a transforming Pakistan that is not viewed as either partisan or playing zero-sum games inside Afghanistan will be almost certainly well placed to assist reconciliation and compromise in Afghanistan.

The foregoing suggests that a successful Pakistan policy towards strengthening peace and stability in Afghanistan which would also hugely facilitate the flourishing of its bilateral and indeed strategic cooperation with Afghanistan can only be a by-product of successfully overcoming the much larger and daunting domestic and external challenges that confront Pakistan today. Externally, the greatest challenge will be improving relations with India because of the degeneration of the latter’s governance and strategic thinking. Its overt fascism is fueled by a millennium of resentment towards the Muslims of the subcontinent.

Sooner or later, even Afghan perceptions of India will be impacted. Pakistan will not need to adopt a zero-sum policy towards Indian influence in Afghanistan which can only be counterproductive. Pakistan's Afghanistan policy should be significantly informed by the perceptions of those segments of its population who have had the closest cultural, linguistic and tribal ties with the Afghans over the centuries.