

What should Pakistan want in Afghanistan

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As expected, the December 4 London Conference on Afghanistan jointly hosted by Prime Minister David Cameron and President Ashraf Ghani yielded pledges from the 60-odd countries attending the Conference to maintain support for Afghanistan after foreign troops are withdrawn, but no specific levels of support were mentioned. Only US Secretary of State John Kerry made the somewhat vague promise that the Obama Administration would ask Congress to approve “extraordinary” levels of aid through to 2017. It was, however, made clear that the flow of this assistance would be dependent on Afghanistan taking the steps laid out in the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework to curb corruption and streamline the utilisation of the assistance provided. The London Conference communique talks of the new Afghan government implementing “sustained realistic strategies to root out corruption, combat terrorism and strengthen good governance and rule of law”.

Will this be possible? Afghanistan has 850,000 persons on its payroll. What do they do? In the province of Ghor, an education department survey showed that of the 740 schools, 80 per cent were non-operational and one can, therefore, assume that 80 per cent of the 4,000 teachers are ghost employees. President Ghani has said that he was told that Afghanistan had 60,000 teachers but feared that a survey may show that only 6,000 of them were working. Perhaps the National Unity Government is capable of the harsh administrative measures needed to correct this situation but clearly this will not happen while the insurgency continues. More importantly, from Pakistan’s perspective, if these ghost workers join the ranks of the 40 per cent deemed to be unemployed or under-employed, there will be a fresh exodus of economic refugees across the porous Pak-Afghan border adding to the five million refugees we are already hosting.

On the peace process, the London Conference “reaffirmed the importance of the peace process to ending violence and sustaining development in Afghanistan”. It further said that “the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process towards reconciliation and peace must be transparent.” It “reiterated the importance of the peace process principles as per the UN Security Council resolutions, such as the renunciation of violence, the breaking of ties to international terrorism and respect for the Afghan Constitution, including its human rights provisions”.

But are the Taliban or other elements of the “armed opposition” ready to participate in the peace process? In the last three weeks, there have been 11 attacks in Kabul, apparently designed to prove that the Taliban can attack at will, to scare foreign aid workers who have started leaving Afghanistan, and to generally enhance the sense of insecurity in Kabul.

More ominous, however, are the large-scale attacks exemplified by the Taliban occupation of the British vacated Camp Bastion in Helmand. It took the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) three days to retake Camp Bastion and that, too, became possible only after air raids were carried out by the Isaf forces. It is such evidence of ANSF shortcomings that has prompted President Barack Obama to authorise — in contradiction of earlier orders — to permit Isaf forces to continue to provide combat support to the ANSF through to 2015. It has also probably prompted American commanders on the ground to propose once again that the withdrawal of all combat forces by 2016 should be reconsidered and made subject to the actual ground reality. In the absence of reconciliation, I see President Obama being forced by his military commanders to

postpone withdrawal of combat forces well beyond 2016. Do the regional countries have concerns about this? If so, only the advancement of the peace process can help prevent this.

This brings us to the question of the role Pakistan has to play in moving the peace process forward. In London, our prime minister spoke of a “comprehensive and enduring partnership” and of “fighting terrorism as a common enemy”. This was also, one can assume, the principal point of discussion during the spate of visits exchanged between Kabul and Islamabad in the past few weeks and in meetings in Beijing and London. President Ghani, in pressing Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the table with reasonable demands for reconciliation, also addressed the highly exaggerated Pakistani concerns about India’s role in Afghanistan by withdrawing the request Hamid Karzai had made to India to buy Russian military equipment for supply to Afghanistan and by emphasising that if Afghanistan’s future lay in “regional connectivity”, then Pakistan had to be the premier partner.

Pakistan has long argued that its influence over the Taliban is limited quoting examples of how the Taliban while in power had rejected such Pakistani requests as the surrender of the Pakistani terrorist Riaz Basra or protecting the Bamiyan statues. This is true, but it is also true that the Taliban could afford to reject these demands because of their perception that those making the requests did not represent all centres of power in Pakistan. Now one hopes that Operation Zarb-e-Azb and the pledge to fight terrorism as the common enemy will convey to the Taliban that any demand we make of them will represent the view of all centres of power in Pakistan.

When one sees the situation in Pakistan, Chaman seems to be more a Taliban city than a Pakistani one. The Quetta districts of Pushtunabad and Khrotabad and the refugee camps in the vicinity are off-limits to Pakistani authorities. Sectarian attacks against the Hazaras unite the Taliban and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. It is imperative that if we wish to re-establish the writ of the state, we create conditions in which Taliban fighters no longer have a place on our soil.

This is the moment of truth for us. Perhaps we have allowed the problem to fester for too long and no longer have the capacity to decisively influence the Frankenstein we have nurtured but we must realise that every day that passes will reduce our influence further and allow the situation in Afghanistan to deteriorate further. There is a reasonable resolution available. It is the road map that the High Peace Council brought to Pakistan in November 2012 and which envisaged that to start with, the Kabul government could recognise the political reality of the support the Taliban enjoyed — a recent credible Asia Foundation survey shows that one-third of Afghans still sympathise with the Taliban — by giving them such non-elected offices as district and provincial governorships and then let them participate in the next round of elections.

The writer was foreign secretary from 1994-97 and also served as Pakistan’s ambassador to Iran (1992-94) and the US (1990-91)

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