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AfPak hat-trick is doable for Obama but unlikely

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

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It makes good copy for the Indian press that the United States National Security Advisor Susan Rice made a rare trip overseas to Pakistan in the weekend with the intent to read the riot act to the country's army chief Gen. Raheel Sharif regarding the unfinished business of reining in the Haqqani Network.

But Washington would know from previous experience that hectoring to the Pakistani military does not help matters. More importantly, the US is not in a position at present to dictate terms to the Pakistani military regarding Afghanistan.

Objectively speaking, there is no reason to disbelieve the contention by Pakistan's national security and foreign affairs advisor Sartaj Aziz that 80-90 percent of the 'capacity' of the Haqqanis is anyway located within Afghanistan and not in Waziristan.

It would have been incredibly foolish on the part of the Haqqanis to want to cross the path of the Pakistani military hunting down the Pakistani Taliban groups in Waziristan. Nor is it likely that today the Pakistani military will have a crack at the Haqqani Network, which remains the 'steel frame' of the Taliban insurgency.

Having said that, the US has specific concerns, which were what brought Rice to Pakistan to convey as the demarche by the White house. One, the serial attacks by the Haqqanis in Kabul

recently, no matter their motivations, have rattled the Afghan government, and the stability of the leadership under President Ashraf Ghani is of vital interest to Washington.

The unwritten understanding between Washington and Islamabad has been that Pakistan would not undermine the national unity government in Kabul, which is struggling to stay afloat even otherwise.

The US probably understands that the serial attacks on Kabul by the Haqqani Network were a revenge act to settle scores with the Afghan intelligence for what the latter did (without Ghani's knowledge, it seems) by disclosing the death of Mullah Omar literally on the eve of the second round of the peace talks due in Pakistan. But Washington would ensure that the chapter is closed and life moves on.

Equally, the Taliban (Haqqanis) recently began targeting US personnel and there have been casualties. The code of conduct in the past year or two was that the insurgents would leave the American personnel alone, now that the latter no longer undertake 'combat missions'. Washington would convey in no uncertain terms that the killing of American personnel would be totally unacceptable under any circumstances.

Without doubt, the US wants the peace talks to be resumed without delay between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The assessment in Washington would be that contrary to the doomsday scenario sketched by many 'experts' or the media reports, the new Taliban leadership under Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, who enjoys the backing of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, faces no real danger of being challenged by rival elements.

On the other hand, President Ashraf Ghani also seems to realize that the hardliners within the Kabul set-up should not set the agenda, if for no other reason than that there is no viable alternative to the peace talks and a political settlement (which demands Pakistan's cooperation.)

Over and above all this, President Barack Obama is called upon to take a final decision on the scale and scope of the US' military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2016. A decision of this nature is difficult to reach when there is lingering uncertainty about the resumption of peace talks.

Thus, whichever way one looks at things, Pakistan's approach in the given situation during the coming weeks and months becomes crucial for the Obama administration. The recent surge by the Taliban in Helmand could only be beaten back with the direct involvement by the US and NATO, and it underscored the reality that despite all the hype about the Afghan government forces, their actual capacity to withstand an all-out Taliban assault was called into question.

In the circumstances, Obama's invitation to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to visit the White House is carefully timed for late October when the big-ticket item regarding the future US troop deployment in Afghanistan will be the US president's priority.

Rice personally delivered Obama's invitation to Sharif. It is a big gesture from Obama. We may expect Pakistan to respond positively to Obama's overture. There are indications that Aziz might travel to Kabul shortly to engage with Ghani and to discuss the resumption of peace talks.

Having said that, Pakistan has also handed over its 'wish list' to the White House.

First, Pakistan has drawn a 'red line' that unless India's (hostile) role in Kabul is curbed, it will continue to feel insecure. Specifically, Pakistan perceives that India influences or patronizes a faction within the Afghan intelligence agency, which enables the Indian intelligence to mount covert operations on Pakistani territory.

Second, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has handed over to Rice to transmit to Obama a dossier containing details of alleged Indian 'military and financial support' to terrorists to destabilize Pakistan. He did this with the expectation that Obama will take up the matter with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi when they meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York late September.

This is an unprecedented move on the part of Pakistan. By making such a move, Pakistan has directly linked its cooperation with the US in the Afghan endgame to its vital national security interests.

Presumably, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon will run a fine comb through Sharif's terrorism dossier and give their estimation to Obama. It had better be that there is substance in Pakistan's terrorism dossier, because the bottom line is that Pakistan has co-related the Afghan settlement with its normalization of ties with India.

The Pakistani officials have uniformly urged Rice that intervention by the US is needed to pressure India to come to the negotiating table regarding the Kashmir issue. On the face of it, Pakistan's demand is minimal – India should show willingness to discuss all outstanding issues and find a solution peacefully through negotiations.

On the other hand, the Modi government will suffer a huge loss of face if it were to climb down from the high horse and engage with Pakistan on all outstanding issues, including Kashmir. The right wing Hindu nationalist forces, which mentor the Modi government, and the hardliners within the Indian establishment, who militate against any sort of compromise with Pakistan, continue to call the shots in New Delhi.

Put differently, the momentous Indian decision to join the Afghan civil war, which goes back to the second half of the nineties, has come full circle. The Afghan issue, Kashmir problem, and regional security and stability have got entangled in a manner that it is going to be very difficult for Obama to cut the Gordian knot. After resolving the intractable foreign-policy challenges posed by Cuba and Iran, an AfPak hat-trick may seem doable for Obama, but is unlikely.

Pressuring Modi is easier said than done when the US also counts on the present government in New Delhi as a far more willing interlocutor than the previous government to get involved in Washington's rebalance strategy in Asia. For the Hindu nationalists, Pakistan is an unfinished business of Partition and far more emotive an issue than China's rise.

Again, India is a far more absorbing concern than the Pakistani market for American business and Washington expects the Modi government to open up the Indian market and be more accommodative to the US business interests. In fact, a key forum – US-India Commercial

Dialogue – has just been constituted and US’ commercial and economic diplomacy towards India is shifting gear.

Modi would estimate that as the fastest growing economy in the world, the Indian market enchants Washington’s policymakers and conditions Obama’s South Asia policies. Modi trusts his capacity to present the Indian market in seductive terms for America’s civilian and military exports and on parallel track his diplomatic skill to ingratiate himself as Obama’s ally in the US’ stuttering containment strategy against China.

The best thing to happen at this point would be that a face-to-face meeting takes place between Modi and Sharif in New York. But that seems improbable. What seems attainable is that Modi may allow himself to be persuaded by Obama to impose self-restraint in India’s AfPak policies.