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In the post-London scenario, caution becomes even more necessary; if the international community wants to try the dialogue option, it shall have to lower the temperature by scaling down combat operations

The London Conference on January 28 has turned more heat on the arena called Af-Pak. The vow to pursue talks with the "good Taliban" by driving a division within the Mullah Omar-led insurgency through a multi-million-dollar trust has prompted several questions because the "reintegration trust" as well as the pursuit of dialogue is likely to further expose the region to multiple selfish competing interests and intrigues of neighbouring countries – Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, China – regional powers like Turkey, India and Russia, plus international players such as the United States and other lead NATO members.

Al Qaeda, the stateless entity riding a vague pan-Islamist and anti American ideology is, of course, the other actor in this arena, pitched against most of the regional and international powers – the common enemy, so to say, operating out of the Af-Pak region. This essentially means Afghanistan will remain hostage to the whims and wishes of all these actors – every one of them proposing its own solutions.

But let us set these apprehensions aside for a while, and try to decipher the positive messages that emanated from the London conference.

The first message revolved around the realisation that the over-bearing reliance on the military component in the past years has only further fuelled the insurgency. The second flowed from the first message i.e. it was time to deescalate the military campaign in favour of talks. The third message was embedded in the creation of the reintegration fund, aimed at wooing the "good Taliban" away from the battlefield. Here, once again, the western mind went wrong: it is up against a fighter who is acting and reacting out of commitment and not for money. And if the past is any indicator, all those who walked out of the Taliban ranks as "good Taliban" lost their relevance altogether. So, the approach of buying off the "good Taliban" is as good as nothing. This, nevertheless, should not demean the intention of creating some space for negotiations.

Secondly, and interestingly, the post-London vibes that one gets from Moscow through diplomatic channels is one of welcoming Pakistan's potential role in creating the space for dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.

Thirdly, on January 31, Indian Foreign Minister SM Krishna indicated his country was willing to back efforts to seek peace with Taliban to stabilise Afghanistan. "If the Taliban meets the three conditions put forward – acceptance of the Afghan constitution, severing connections with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups and renunciation of violence, and are accepted in

the mainstream of Afghan politics and society, we could do business," Krishna told *The Times of India* .

Fourthly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel took the lead immediately after the London conference in underscoring Pakistan's importance by saying it should be more closely involved in solving the Afghan conflict.

"There will be no peace in this region unless Pakistan carries its share of responsibility." For a comprehensive solution, "we need a much greater involvement of Afghan authorities and the inclusion of neighbouring countries, in particular Pakistan," Merkel told German weekly *Welt am Sonntag* . (January 31).

Russian diplomats, on the other hand, also sound encouraging. Why should Pakistan not use its influence and act as ground-leveller, if not broker, if the international community so desires, said one senior official in Islamabad. Both Islamabad and Moscow agree on preserving Afghanistan's sovereignty. They also support the regional approach (six plus two).

Abdul Basit, the spokesman for the Pakistani ministry of foreign affairs, insists the contacts with Moscow regarding Afghanistan have been unusually good and forward-moving in the past couple of years. He speaks of much better coordination and warmth in relations with Russia.

This synergy of approaches augurs well for all the regional players but only if they can divorce their bilateral or multi-lateral misgivings rooted in the past. This applies to both – Russo-Pak relations as well as the complicated Indo-Pak relationship.

Diplomats from lead European nations, including those from Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, also acknowledge that given Pakistan's

a) geographical advantage, i.e. a common 2,560 km border with Afghanistan;

b) leverage with various factions of the Taliban, and Mullah Omer in particular;

c) lead position within the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC);

d) good working relations with China and the United States; and

e) exceptionally good political rapport with Saudi Arabia (which has been hosting Afghan mujahideen, the Taliban and other leaders, including its proxy Professor Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, an ethnic Pashtun and the torch-bearer of the Saudi Salafi school of thought in Afghanistan).

Islamabad could at least try – if tasked by the international community – to reach out to the core of the Taliban i.e. to the mobile shura led by Mullah Omar. Gulbuddin Hekmetyar, Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani are of course important, but those familiar with Afghan power dynamics know that Mullah Omar holds the real key to de-escalating the insurgency.

Suspicions, however, will accompany any role that Pakistan plays on the way to deescalating the conflict through opening of space for talks.

While Pakistan needs to build upon the goodwill the London Conference generated for it indirectly, well-meaning members of the international community also need to ensure that the dynamics created by the London conference are not scuttled by one country or another; Afghanistan's medium to long term interests must not fall victim to bilateral or multi-lateral state rivalries. In this context, resumption of the Indo-Pakistan dialogue will also be very important because this may help the intelligence establishments of both countries to address allegations of interference through proxies (Balochistan and Kashmir are cases in point).

During the Pak-Afghan-Iran foreign ministerial conference in Islamabad middle of January, the Afghan foreign minister Rangeen Dafdar Spanta issued a passionate appeal when he said his request to all the neighbours would be to "please keep Afghanistan out of your bilateral problems. We have already suffered a lot and do not add to those sufferings by fighting your proxy wars on the Afghan soil."

Spanta's reference obviously centred on the Indo-Pak and US-Iran rivalries that keep casting ominous shadows on the stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan.

A top British government functionary also conceded that point recently and urged caution as Pakistan may embark on the path of talks. Balancing Pakistan's own national security interests with the need to play an active role in reconciliation with the Taliban, without being seen as imposing its own agenda on the country, amounts to a daunting challenge.

International players also expect of Pakistan to "demonstrate its intent of helping in stabilising Afghanistan." In this regard, Pakistan's military establishment probably did precisely that by first moving against militants in Swat and then South Waziristan in October last year. This context, and some forceful arguments by the army chief General Ashfaq Kayani as well as Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi probably also helped Pakistan regain a lot of political space it had lost under General Pervez Musharraf.

During his recent Brussels visit, and also before that, General Kayani kept telling his visitors including those from the United States, as well as members of the Pakistani intelligentsia, that the army would continue cooperating with US-ISAF troops but only in a calculated and measured way. The scale and timing of any military campaign in North Waziristan would be of our choice and not of outsiders, sounds the message from the military high command.

The army also keeps cautioning that that “any military adventure into the tribal areas requires extreme caution and consideration for the future.” The bulk of foreign troops will most probably be gone in a few years, leaving Pakistan to fend for itself and also to co-exist with the very tribes that will be hurt when the army moves against the militants nestled among them.

In the post-London scenario, caution becomes even more necessary; if the international community wants to try the dialogue option, it shall have to lower the temperature by scaling down combat operations. Only then would the potential peace-broker be in a position to encourage the Afghan Taliban into talks.

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