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Afghanistan's Future Cannot be secured by sidelining India:

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US Special Envoy on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad skipping India as he cavorts across other regional capitals from Islamabad to Amman to broker a peace settlement with Taliban raises crucial questions whether it is the US deliberate policy to side-line India from Afghan peace process or is it the personal proclivity of Khalilzad reported to be tilted in Pakistan's favour.

When it comes to securing a peaceful future for Afghanistan, it needs to be noted that the incumbent Afghanistan Government in Kabul headed by President Ghani and India are on the same page. Afghanistan's successive Governments have displayed unreserved strategic trust in India's benign record of its genuine reconstruction efforts and involvement in rebuilding Afghanistan war-ravaged infrastructure damaged by Afghan Taliban and Pakistan-affiliated terrorist groups. This is superimposed on layers of ancient civilizational ties between India and Afghanistan pre-dating inception of Pakistan.

Pointed out in my last paper was Pakistan PM Imran Khan's devious plot of suggesting an Interim Government in Kabul to enable break of deadlock in US-Taliban dialogue at Doha. It was highlighted that it was Pakistan PMs insidious attempt to gain a backdoor entry for its protégé, the Afghan Taliban, in the governing structure in place in Kabul---something which the Taliban could not secure by decades of their terrorism strikes against US Forces and the Kabul Government.

In a rather uncanny coincidence PM Imran Khan again repeated his Interim Government proposal synchronised with US Special Envoy Khalilzad latest rush around Islamabad and regional capitals skipping India. Analytically, it leads one to believe that somewhere there is support for Pakistan PMs proposal by US Special Envoy.

If it was otherwise then the US Special Envoy or the State Department in Washington should have contradicted PM Imran Khan's repetition of the Interim Government proposal.

President Ghani has for the second time strongly criticised Pakistan PM Imran Khan for unwarranted interference in Afghanistan's affairs. India too should have also made its displeasure known to Washington of the bad optics created by the US Special Envoy. Successive US Administrations have factored to some extent that India has legitimate security interests in Afghanistan and its security and stability. Apparently, the present US Special Envoy Khalilzad in his hurry to broker a peace settlement with Afghan Taliban at any cost to pave the way for exit of US Forces from Afghanistan is ill-conceived.

US Special Envoy Khalilzad demonstrated pattern of movements cantered more on Islamabad than on Kabul and his apparent lack of confabulations with influential groups within Afghanistan who also can play an important determining role in Afghanistan's peace and security strongly indicates that the US Special Envoy has a Pak-centric tilt in terms of finding solution for resolving the conflict generated by the Afghan Taliban.

Should it be forgotten by the US Special Envoy with his long years of handling Afghanistan and having stayed in Afghanistan as US Ambassador that Pakistan is not the solution but the originator of unleashing the Afghan Taliban with its medieval Islamic fundamentalism barbarity as its signature tune on Afghanistan's political landscape? Should it be forgotten by the US Special Envoy that Pakistan and especially the Pakistan Army Generals sitting in Rawalpindi would not be satisfied by anything less than the prospects of reversion of Afghanistan to full control of the Afghan Taliban exercising proxy power in Kabul on behalf of Pakistan?

What is not clear at this stage is whether all the Pakistan-centric initiatives being undertaken by US Special Envoy Khalilzad are of his own volition emerging from a wide-ranging free charter given to him by the US President or does he have US official sanction or nod to go down the path that he is traversing?

On both counts stated above India needs to take up the Afghanistan issue at the highest level with the United States regarding India's legitimate security interests and that they are not jeopardised by any premature United States initiatives to appease Pakistan on any counts.

US President Trump in recent times has given strong indications by his forthright assertions that United States considers India's centrality as a pivotal player in the US-conceived Indo Pacific Security Template. Further, US President Trump has unreservedly castigated Pakistan on occasions for double-timing the United States on Afghanistan and working against US security interest in that nation.

Afghanistan as the nation which has suffered immeasurably at the hands of Pakistan's disruptive strategies executed through its controlling influence over the Afghan Taliban has strongly protested against Pakistan's continued interference. Afghanistan President Ghani had

strongly protested against Pakistan PM Imran Khan's repetitive assertions within recent weeks for Afghan Taliban being included in an Interim Government before peace settlement talks. In actual terms what the Pakistan PM was conveying was that the United States consider replacement of President Ghani's Administration as a prelude to Pakistan prevailing over Afghan Taliban to continue with a dialogue with the United States.

Can the United States afford to ignore the strong feelings of the Afghanistan Government against the direction and path which the US Special Envoy has adopted with his Pakistan tilt? Can the United States afford to ignore the obvious and apparent side lining of India resorted to by US Special Envoy Khalilzad in his scurrying trips around the region in a Pakistan-centric trajectory skipping New Delhi?

On both counts above, the United States would be seriously endangering the chances of success of any settlement with Afghan Taliban authored to please Pakistan by its Special Envoy. There should be no doubts on this score in Washington policy circles.

The United States cannot afford to achieve durable peace in Afghanistan if the Kabul Government, important factions opposed to return of Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan's future governance and India as the regional power which traditionally has much influence with successive regimes in Kabul are side-lined or bypassed.

At best, any hurried tactically expedient contrived settlement arrived at by US Special Envoy at Doha with unwarranted compromises may only secure a temporary reprieve and fig-leaf for withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan. Such a compromise will not only fail to achieve durable peace in Afghanistan but also inherently carry within itself seeds of renewed conflict and strife in the immediate wake of exit of US Forces from Afghanistan.

Concluding, one can only stress emphatically is that in terms of the contemporaneous geopolitical situation where China is waiting in the wings to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan with Pakistan's collusion by a possible US exit, the only honourable course available for United States is therefore to stay the course in Afghanistan.

A Permanent US Forward Military Presence as espoused by me in earlier writings, that is, on the lines of US military embedment in Japan and South Korea would enable strategic space for Afghanistan's stabilisation. It will also enable the United States to maintain a crucial military perch overseeing Central Asia. This is an inescapable US imperative even after Afghan National Army becomes strong and resilient to safeguard its national security.

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