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US bends to Pakistan's wish

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The unscheduled visit by United States Vice President Joe Biden to Islamabad this week underscores Washington's embarrassment and anxiety that it stands excluded from a regional initiative on Afghan peace process that could be about to take off. The rapid sequence of events over the past fortnight has taken Washington by surprise.

There have been so many difficult moments in the US-Pakistani relationship through the past nine years since the US invasion of Afghanistan. But Biden's mission can only be compared with the visit to Islamabad by the then-US secretary of state Colin Powell in mid-October 2001. If the Powell mission was seminal to the US invasion of Afghanistan, Biden's mission may well turn out to be formative in sowing the germane seeds of peace.

The trail leading Biden to Islamabad began in Istanbul on Christmas Eve when, as part of Ankara's three-year old initiative, Turkish President Abdullah Gul hosted a fifth summit meeting of the trilateral forum comprising his Pakistani and Afghan counterparts Asif Zardari and Hamid Karzai. The Turks take their mediatory role very seriously and have indeed met with some measure of success in bringing Kabul and Islamabad closer together as neighbors - an endeavor in which the US has repeatedly failed. But then, Turkey's credentials cannot be easily matched.

A home for the Taliban

Turkey is an "ally" of the US, Russia and Pakistan and a long-lost friend of China; it has "normalized" with Iran and Saudi Arabia and is an active Organization of the Islamic Conference member; Turkey has a claim over the "Turkic" heritage of Central Asia; Ankara maintains good

equations with various Afghan groups and kept a line open to Taliban leadership in the late 1990s; Turkey is a North Atlantic Treaty Organization country with an International Security Assistance Force contingent that acquitted itself well; and Turkey is a generous donor for Afghan reconstruction.

Turkish foreign policy has become extremely innovative and ambitious. Ankara worked hard to bring Kabul and Islamabad together and it now aspires to scale audacious heights in the Hindu Kush.

Turkey is willing to allow the opening of a "representative office" of the Taliban on its soil. Karzai says the idea came from "dignitaries close to the Taliban". At any rate, it figured in the tripartite summit at Istanbul and Turkey and Pakistan voiced support. Interestingly, Taliban have not so far disowned it, either.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutglu later said, "We are ready to meet these expectations at every level. Turkey is closely following each step to be taken. We are ready to perform in Turkey in any process sought by the Afghan [government](#) and we are also ready to contribute to processes that may be under way outside Turkey."

Just before Karzai left Kabul for Istanbul, he deputed the head of the Afghan High Council for Peace (HCP), Burhanuddin Rabbani, (a former president) to visit Tehran. Within days, Tehran also had another important Afghan visitor, Mohammed Fahim, key figure in the erstwhile Northern Alliance and currently first vice president. (Curiously, a veteran "Afghan hand" from Moscow, Viktor Ivanov, former KGB general who heads the anti-narcotic agency in Russia, also arrived in Tehran at the same time as Fahim.)

Karzai obviously sounded out the Iranians on his project kick-starting the intra-Afghan dialogue. But Tehran's stance appears to be ambivalent, though its stated position is consistently that the continued presence of US troops is aggravating regional tensions. The visit by Fahim suggests that Tehran is keeping its options open. The recent fracas over Iran's petroleum supplies to Afghanistan also suggests some friction between Tehran and Kabul. The powerful speaker of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) Ali Larijani is due to visit Kabul shortly.

Ahead of his [trip](#) to Tehran, Rabbani also addressed a major regional peace *jirga* (council) at Nangarhar convened by the government, comprising over 800 delegates drawn from various Pashtun-dominated eastern provinces where Taliban are active. Rabbani exhorted the Taliban, "This is your country. Afghanistan is your country. Of course, everyone makes mistakes. We need to work together to fix those mistakes."

The *jirga* decided that the Taliban's reintegration must be in line with Islamic values. "Whatever we do here will be based on Islam," Rabbani said. The *jirga* took a significant decision that in the reconciliation process Taliban must be given the latitude to "deal with their fellow Afghans rather than with [US-led] coalition forces".

Pakistani turnaround

Following Karzai's return from Istanbul, things have speeded up. Last Tuesday, Rabbani led a 25-member delegation to Islamabad at the invitation of Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani. This signified a turnaround by Pakistan, which (and Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami) had been previously derisive about the HCP. Quite obviously, there has been some rethink in Islamabad.

In fact, Pakistani army chief General Parvez Kiani received Rabbani in Rawalpindi on Wednesday. The official press release said they discussed "matters of mutual interest". The fact that Kiani personally staked his prestige becomes very important.

The meeting in Rawalpindi signaled Pakistani military's endorsement of Rabbani's leadership role in any intra-Afghan dialogue. Far more important, however, it contained an unmistakable hint to Washington that with or without US involvement, a dialogue might well commence in a near future, Pakistan is going ahead with a regional initiative involving Karzai, as there is little time to lose, and it is in Washington's interest to be on the same page.

Pakistan has been critical of David Petraeus' surge strategy in Afghanistan and has refused to undertake operations in the North Waziristan tribal area despite repeated US urgings.

Karzai couldn't have made a better choice than Rabbani to spearhead the peace process as the latter has old links with the Taliban dating back to the jihad of 1980s. Pakistan's dealings with Rabbani go even further back to the mid-1970s predating the communist revolution. Rabbani is an Islamic scholar who has an appeal among the Islamic circles in Pakistan, especially the leadership of the Islam Pasand parties such as Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. Rabbani belonged to the original "Peshawar Seven" during the jihad and had extensive dealings with Pakistani military and intelligence.

Rabbani is also a key Tajik leader heading the Jamiat-i-Islami and it is important to bring Tajiks on board any Afghan settlement. He is a veteran mujahideen leader enjoying wide networking with commanders like Jalaluddin Haqqani who are with the Taliban. Rabbani can be instrumental to putting up a bridge through which controversial figures like Jalaluddin could cross over to mainstream Afghan politics some day.

All-in-all, therefore, Kiani's decision to stake his prestige on Rabbani can be seen as a meaningful shift in the Pakistani strategy.

US fears 'exclusion'

The speed with which Kabul and Islamabad are pushing the proposal for intra-Afghan dialogue has taken the US by surprise. The US maintains that it is still premature to talk to the Taliban. Rabbani's mission to Islamabad, in particular, would have made Washington sit up. The US never took a real liking toward Rabbani due to his staunchly nationalist-Islamist streak, his off-and-on links with Iran and his virulent "anti-American" outlook, which he never cared to hide.

Washington senses "exclusion", while so much is happening. Ironically, it finds itself in the same boat as Tehran. The US acting special representative for Afghanistan Frank Ruggeiro's quick dash to Islamabad Thursday aimed at taking stock of the flow of events. Ruggeiro was shown full courtesies, including a meeting with Kiani, but Pakistan seems to have held the ground that talks must begin with the Taliban.

Swiftly following up on Ruggeiro's reccy trip, President Barack Obama has deputed Biden to forthwith proceed to Islamabad. Obama's choice of Biden makes careful study. Put simply, Biden has been arguing that Taliban do not pose any real threat to the US national security interests as such and a deal with them makes it possible to bring the war to an end.

Petraeus, on the other hand, hopes to intensify the military operations to degrade the Taliban to a point that they will crawl on their knees and sue for peace on US' terms. Petraeus is in it for the long haul whereas Biden is in great hurry.

There is widespread skepticism within the US security establishment over Petraeus' claim that his strategy is beginning to work. By nominating Biden to lead the mission to Islamabad, Obama seems to indicate he keeps an open mind.

Zardari is visiting Washington this week while Biden is rushing to Islamabad. The strange two-way traffic highlights the depth of US anxiety over the slide in US-Pakistan ties as also its admission that Kiani is the key interlocutor. The murder of the [governor](#) of the Pakistani province of Punjab, Salman Taseer, and its after-shocks on the Pakistani society and politics has only muddled the waters of the anxiety in the White House over the slide in US-Pakistan relations in the recent months.

Based on briefings by senior US officials, Washington Post has reported on the main elements of Biden's mission. They are:

- ☐ Biden will seek a "frank exchange of views and priorities" with Kiani in terms of the Afghan endgame and the "long-term strategy for the region".
- ☐ The US may not press for urgent commencement of Pakistani military operations in North Waziristan.
- ☐ Biden will categorically assure that the US has no intentions of mounting cross-border military operations into Pakistani territory.
- ☐ Biden will ascertain what Pakistan's needs, expectations and demands are in return for extending more cooperation in the war.
- ☐ The US will offer a new assistance package with military, intelligence and economic components.
- ☐ The US will strengthen troop presence on the Afghan side of the border with Pakistan and intensify intelligence-sharing arrangements with Pakistan on [India's](#) activities in Afghanistan.

The report estimated a "significant shift in [US] administration thinking" and Obama's inclination to join the peace process and recognize that Pakistan has an important role, "if not a dominant role", in reconciliation talks with the Taliban.

Washington is, in essence, making a virtue out of necessity, which is of course good politics

almost always. Ideally, the US would have liked Pakistan to robustly supplement the US war effort. But the heart of the matter is that if and when intra-Afghan peace talks begin stemming from a regional initiative by Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey (and, perhaps, grudging Iranian acquiescence), the entire US position will cave in and the Obama administration will find itself in an absurd and untenable position of adamantly insisting on pursuing a war which neither the Afghan people nor the regional powers want.