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HIGHLIGHTS

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I Overview

Pakistan: A dramatic end mediated by the Pakistan Army to the protests cum sit in by Barelvi protesters in Islamabad on 27th November was seen as a capitulation of the Government to blackmail in the streets and equally as yet another instance of the Army extending its presence in Pakistan's political space. The US relationship loomed large with the US Defense Secretary visiting Pakistan in the first week of December. The Kulbhushan Jadhav case made a comeback to the headlines with the Government of Pakistan agreeing to a family visit. Relations with India overall remained on a tense but familiar plateau as in previous months. Terrorist attacks regularly punctuated the months chronology suggesting that the relative calm on this front since end 2015 may be getting eroded.

Afghanistan: The internal security situation remains precarious and in the circumstances the regional situation acquired a larger profile. The formal inauguration of the Chabahar Port project in Iran was one aspect of this. Russia's position on different aspects of the situation in Afghanistan formed another.

II Developments in Pakistan

India: LOC Ceasefire violations: The Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson answering a media query on 8th December disclosed that on 20 November 2017, the Foreign Minister addressed a letter to the Indian External Affairs Minister underlining the precarious situation on the LOC and proposing "extraordinary measures to avoid loss of human lives and de-escalate tensions, through the intervention of political leadership to help augment existing arrangements, such as the DG MOs hotline contacts and border meetings, which do not seem to be working." Pakistan press reports thereafter quoted the spokesperson as saying on the 10th of December that the Indian response was 'stubborn' and the Indian minister had responded that 'India only opens fire in response to incursions'. There has been no authoritative statement from India in response to these statements. The reasons and timing of the Pakistani letter remain intriguing beyond it being a somewhat feeble attempt to develop a talking point in their favor.

Release of Hafiz Sayeed: The Jamaat ud Dawa "Émir" Hafiz Sayeed was released from house arrest on 22 November after being under house arrest since January 2017 by a court order. The Government of

India's response was that this represented a mainstreaming of terror in Pakistan. The Ministry of External Affairs had used the identical term of 'mainstreaming' of terrorism two years ago in December 2014 when Hafiz Saeed had addressed a rally at the Minar i Pakistan in Lahore. The term has to be seen in the context of a rash of statements and developments regarding the Jamaat ud Dawa's political ambitions even as it remains listed by the UNSC as a terrorist entity.

The response of the United States also merits consideration. "The Pakistani government should make sure that he is arrested and charged for his crimes," and "The United States is deeply concerned that Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Saeed has been released from house arrest in Pakistan,". The State Department also said that "Lashkar-e-Taiba is a designated Foreign Terrorist Organisation responsible for the death of hundreds of innocent civilians in terrorist attacks, including a number of American citizens". What is somewhat unusual is that the State Department statement was followed up by a statement from the White House that the release 'sends a deeply troubling message about Pakistan's commitment to combating international terrorism and belies Pakistani claims that it will not provide to sanctuary for terrorists on its soil'. The statement also said that Pakistan's inaction 'will have repercussions for bilateral relations and for Pakistan's global reputation'.

Hafiz Sayeed's release from preventive custody just a few days before the ninth anniversary of the November 2008 Mumbai attack is not sufficient to explain the stridency of these statements. These in fact point to the deep tensions that have characterized different aspects of US Pakistan relations over 2017.

Kulbhushan Jadhav Case: The Pakistan Foreign Office announced that that "Commander Jadhav's wife and mother' would be meeting him on 25 December 2017 as agreed between the two sides. The Ministry of External Affairs had announced on 9th December that it had received assurances from Pakistan that "it would ensure safety, security and well-being of the wife and the mother during their stay in Pakistan. They have also agreed that an Indian Diplomat will be allowed to accompany the mother and the wife." Meanwhile at the International Court of Justice Pakistan submitted its counter memorial on the case on 13th December.

China: The 7th meeting of Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) of CPEC, was held in Islamabad on 20th November co-chaired by Federal Minister for Interior and Planning, Development and Reforms, Ahsan Iqbal and his Chinese counterpart. It was attended by the chief ministers of all provinces and the 'prime minister' of POK (Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). There have been press speculations subsequently that some of the projects considered central by Pakistan have suffered setbacks. This speculations centers around three projects in particular: The Diamer-Bhasha dam project (in Gilgit Baltistan, POK) where apparently the Chinese are asking for terms that Pakistan is unwilling to give in order to finance the mega dam. Secondly the Peshawar-Karachi railway project, known as the Main Line 1 project and the Karachi circular railway, have also, by some accounts, run into heavy weather. The third is a bunch of road projects. While details are unavailable to explain the difficulties that have arisen, one possibility is of the complexities being encountered by Chinese state-owned enterprises of financing, managing construction and operating of projects to ensure future sustainability. This is especially so of the more complex projects in the CPEC portfolio beyond the early harvest power and road projects already under implementation. The other possibility, equally likely, is that the political uncertainty in Pakistan has a dampening effect on ministries and civil servants making them more cautious in evaluating projects being awarded without normal tendering procedures.

United States: See Afghanistan section below.

Internal: Security: The trend of regular terrorist attacks in different parts of Pakistan on a range of targets has continued and this in itself is a sign that internal security remains under stress. While national and international attention was rivetted on the Islamabad sit in, a Frontier Corps convoy was attacked by a suicide bomber on 25th November; on 1st December on the occasion of Eid ul Nabi the Pakistan Agricultural Training Institute in Peshawar was attacked by terrorists; on Sunday, 17th December a church in Quetta was attacked. Each of these incidents led to a number of fatal casualties. While none would qualify as a major attack by Pakistani standards the persistence of such events suggests some regrouping of extremist groups may be underway. Certainly this impression was strengthened by a statement issued by the Chinese Embassy in the second week of December that it had information about a "series of terror attacks" planned against Chinese organizations and personnel, and urging its citizens to stay inside and avoid crowded places.

The Barelvi Protests and their Aftermath: The drama associated with the November sit in and protests in Islamabad ended with the government's capitulation and the resignation of its Law minister on 27th November. At the last stages of the sit in instructions were given by the government to the Army that it should step in to aid the civilian authority to restore order. This was responded to by a demurral from the Chief of Army Staff that efforts be made to resolve the situation peacefully. Inevitably the resignation of the Law Minister followed and was the final act of submission by the government to hitherto marginal groups whose movement into political activity is now seen as an event of some significance. The final dispersal of the protesters followed an agreement brokered and countersigned by the Army at a senior level as a guarantor.

There are many questions that have arisen of the links between the Barelvi leadership—itsself divided in numerous factions and ideological disposition—and the military. These came to the surface in the manner in which the Islamabad protests were handled by the army. In the present context in so far as the Barelvis can leech away support from Nawaz Sharif in Punjab that is a more immediate plus point in their favour. But there appears to be more than just a tactical or electoral play here by the military establishment. Possibly its difficulties with the TTP and other Deobandi and Wahabi groups has led the military to think deeply about developing countervailing forces which have less combative attitudes towards it. The Barelvis have therefore an obvious and longer-term relevance here and Pakistan will continue to hear of the *Tehreek i Labaik Ya Rasool Allah* (TLYR) and a political party – the Tehreek e labaik Pakistan (TLP) in the future also. A further weakening of an already embattled PML (N) government is the other principal outcome of the Islamabad protests.

Travails of Pakistan Tehrik i Insaaf (PTI) and Imran Khan: The PTI leader Imran Khan has been hitherto seen as the principal beneficiary of the decline in fortunes of the ruling party since its leader was deposed by the supreme court. However, it has come as a matter of some satisfaction to his opponents that he would not himself be spared by the churning underway in Pakistan as the Judiciary undertakes its own form of political interventions. This came about in a verdict on 15th December on a petition seeking the disqualification of Imran Khan and Jahangir Tareen- the latter being effectively the PTI's number two and principal domestic financier. The petitioner himself is a PML-N leader who had approached the court immediately after the first hearing in the Panama Papers case was held (in which former PM Nawaz Sharif was finally implicated). The allegations against Mr Khan and Mr Tareen pertained to declarations made by them in their nomination papers for the 2013 general election.

The sub text in the petitions clearly is that both Imran Khan and Tareen are as vulnerable to legal sanction as anyone else because of complicated financial dealings that wealthy Pakistanis have long considered to be the norm, whatever the letter of the law may state. The court verdict had pronounced no evidence against Imran Khan but at the same time ordered the disqualification of Tareen. This is a significant blow to a party that has relentlessly attacked political opponents for alleged corruption and preached that Pakistan's progress lies in an unwavering adherence to the rule of law. The disqualification is also close in judicial reasoning- the invocation of Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution- to that used in the ouster of Nawaz Sharif.

Multiple explanations are being given of the Supreme Court verdict. Most have favored the view that the Court was seeking to act in an even-handed manner with all political parties. Others point to an emerging convergence of interest between the military and the Judiciary. However, a fuller analysis of the Court's motives is obviously required and a comment in Pakistan's principal English language daily merits reproduction: "For the political class as a whole, the Supreme Court decision ought to be another warning against the growing judicialisation of politics. The invocation of Article 62(1)f and a lifetime ban from politics for misdeclaration without underlying crimes having been proven in a court of law are arguably signs of democracy headed in the wrong direction."

III Developments in Afghanistan

Snapshot of Economy: The World Bank (WB) said in a report released in end November said that Afghanistan's economy is expected to grow 2.6 percent this year. Despite deteriorating security, the figure is up from the 2.2 percent growth last year. These figures are to be seen in the context of the country's population growth of roughly 3 percent, meaning that gross domestic product per capita continues to decline. According to the report business sentiment is also on the rise although it is still lower than in 2014 when most foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

Growth is significantly below the “war economy” figures of the late 2000s, which saw annual rises averaging nearly 10 percent. The World bank projects 3.2 percent growth next year, assuming a constant security situation. This appears unlikely given a recent increase in attacks by various militant groups. Parliamentary elections are due to be held next year, and Presidential in 2019.

Russia: Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov gave the Russian assessments on Afghanistan in a lecture to a think tank in Delhi on 12th December 2017. He was in India for the Russia- China- India (RIC) trilateral Foreign Ministers meeting. Amongst the points made by the Foreign Minister were that (1) The US strategy of defeating extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan was not viable as the military method of the last 15 years had not worked or reduced violence in the country. (2) He criticized claims that Russia had been open to unconditional talks with the Taliban and had been helping the group with arms. “Never ever was there any proof or fact that Russia supported the Taliban or armed the Taliban as alluded by some American officials. We have contacted the Taliban only for two reasons, when our citizens or citizens of our allies got into harm’s way and we had to extract them and the second was to persuade the Taliban to sit down and negotiate.” (3) The way forward was an inclusive political dialogue including the Taliban and the regional countries. (4) The fight against terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan cannot be separated from the issue of drug trade which funds violence in the country and the region. He said that “The recent American strategy on Afghanistan which emphasizes force will not work just as the huge army of NATO over the last 15 years did not curb violence nor reduce drug production. It is accepted that it feeds terrorist activities directly”.

Pakistan: Statement on Afghanistan: In a debate on Afghanistan in the UN in end November, a Pakistan statement of position said that neither side could “impose a military solution” on the other and a negotiated end to the Afghan war was the only way forward. Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations Maleeha Lodhi said “Neither the coalition and Kabul nor the Afghan Taliban can impose a military solution on each other”. Arguing against the decision to continue to resort to military force in Afghanistan, she said that 16 years of war waged by the world’s most powerful forces had not secured a military solution: “The promotion of a political settlement and the pursuit of a military solution in Afghanistan are mutually incompatible,”. With regard to the Afghan peace and reconciliation plan, she welcomed it and expressed the hope that it would serve as the first step towards a political settlement.

Iran: Chabahar Port: On 3rd December, Iran formally inaugurated the project to expand its southeastern Chabahar port which it hopes would help the country become a key transit route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated the expansion. President Rouhani underlined the importance of Chabahar as Iran’s only port outside the Gulf, and therefore outside an area that is often the locus of tensions with the US navy and Iran’s regional rivals. A day earlier the 2nd Ministerial level trilateral meeting between Afghanistan, India and Iran to discuss the implementation of Trilateral Agreement on Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor was held at Chabahar. It may be recalled that a consignment of wheat was exported to Afghanistan through Chabahar in November 2017.

United States: OThe US Defense Secretary J Mattis was in Pakistan in the first week of December. It would be recalled that the US Secretary of State had been in Pakistan less than a fortnight earlier. Just before the Defense Secretary’s visit the CIA director was widely quoted as saying that that Secretary Mattis was travelling to Pakistan to “make clear the president’s intent” and “will deliver the message that we would love you to do that. And that the safe haven inside of Pakistan has worked to the detriment of our capacity to do what we needed to do in Afghanistan”. He is also quoted as having said that if Pakistan turned down Washington’s request to destroy safe havens: “In the absence of the Pakistanis achieving that, we are going to do everything we can to make sure that that safe haven no longer exists.”

During the halt in Pakistan on 4th December the Secretary met the PM as also the full spectrum of the civilian and military leadership. A statement issued by the US Embassy in Islamabad after the visit said that the Pakistan leaders were told that “Pakistan must redouble its efforts to confront militants and terrorists operating within the country,” and of potential benefits of cooperating with the US “and others” and thereby contribute to peace and stability in Afghanistan and security of the region. Pakistan press reports have quoted the Pakistan PM as having denied the presence of terrorist sanctuaries on Pakistani soil.

(The views expressed are personal)
