



Ambassador TCA Raghavan  
Adviser, Ananta Centre  
Former High Commissioner of India to Pakistan

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Overview
- Developments in Pakistan
- Developments in Afghanistan

## I Overview

**Pakistan:** US policy dominated all other narratives in Pakistan and Afghanistan through end December and January. A US Presidential tweet on New Year's Day was in fact the clearest ever statement of US frustration and exasperation of a decade and a half of intense but ultimately fruitless diplomatic and military engagement with Pakistan. Domestically Pakistan geared up for what will be the most intense US pressure yet with a familiar mixture of defiance and injured victimhood. Former PM Nawaz Sharif continued with his own strong posture of defiance against his ouster by the Supreme Court.

**Afghanistan:** The robust statement of intent from the US President obviously generated optimism in Afghanistan but domestic news in Afghanistan remained pessimistic and on a downward trajectory. The coming out into the open of the tussle between the veteran Governor of Balkh Atta Mohammad Noor and President Ashraf Ghani further reinforced these doubts. The security situation remained bleak.

---

## II Developments in Pakistan

### External:

**United States: Hardening positions on Pakistan:** Through the second half of December, US statements on Pakistan acquired an increasingly harder edge. Vice President Mike Pence on a Christmas visit to Afghanistan and addressing US troops at Bagram Air base said "For too long has Pakistan provided safe haven to the Taliban and many terrorist organisations, but those days are over", and, "President Trump has put Pakistan on notice. As the President said, so I say now: Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with the United States, and Pakistan has much to lose by continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists." The Vice President was the most senior Trump administration official to visit Afghanistan so far.

The Vice-Presidential remarks had, as their immediate foreground, the release of the US National Security Strategy 2017, on Dec 18 - the 17th since the series began in 1987. There is much in the document unpalatable to Pakistan not least the role ascribed to India. Nevertheless, remarks pertaining

to the Af Pak theatre and mirroring those made by US officials, including by President Trump earlier, attracted most attention in Pakistan. These include: "We will insist that Pakistan take decisive action against militant and terrorist groups operating from its soil" as the United States "continues to face threats from transnational terrorists and militants operating from within Pakistan."; "no partnership can survive a country's support for militants and terrorists,."; "We will press Pakistan to intensify its counter-terrorism efforts, who target a partner's own service members and officials."; "The United States will also encourage Pakistan to continue demonstrating that it is a responsible steward of its nuclear assets,."; "The prospect for an Indo-Pakistani military conflict that could lead to a nuclear exchange remains a key concern requiring consistent diplomatic attention".

Pakistan's response to these statements was on expected lines - rejection, reminder and reaffirmation of Pakistan's assistance against terrorists and of the extent of the damage it has itself suffered as an US ally etc. There was also the expected ire at the central role being ascribed to India not just in Afghanistan but in the wider region. The responses by the Foreign Office included statements such as - "South Asia's strategic stability is being undermined by India's unchecked brutalisation of the people of India-held Kashmir and incessant ceasefire violations targeting innocent civilians."

Possibly nothing in these exchanges had prepared Pakistan for what was to follow from the US President's now famous first tweet of 2018 accusing it of 'lies and deceit and thinking of our leaders as fools' and 'They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!'

The directness of the tweet and the fact that it came directly from the President, places Pakistan at the center of US adverse notice and cannot be papered over. Subsequent announcements of suspension of security assistance underwrite that Pakistan faces a situation amounting to a crisis in what still remains its most important external relationship. The Presidential tweet was accompanied therefore by an expected degree of consternation in Pakistan. Most in its strategic fraternity appear convinced that they being scapegoated for Washington's difficulties in Afghanistan. As the strategic community both inside Pakistan and elsewhere discussed options and counter options for both, the fact is that the country faces a long and hard grind. The US is Pakistan's largest export market, military, financial and technology linkages are numerous and largely one sided and the ties that bind its elite to the West in general and the US in particular are a prominent fact of its social fabric. These issues therefore imply that Pakistan faces issues far beyond closure or suspension of military and financial assistance.

The statements that have since emerged from the Pakistan military and government are as yet only the initial responses and it would appear that the system is trying to gauge the full extent of the situation they find themselves in. Statements from the National Security Council and the Cabinet spoke of unwarranted allegations, provocations, insensitivity, etc but also in sum agreed that Pakistan would not act in haste.

**India:** The agreed upon meeting between Kulbhushan Jadhav and his mother and wife took place on 25th December. Somewhat surprisingly, given that details appeared to have been settled in advance, the atmospherics surrounding the occasion ended with familiar India Pakistan recriminations over the conduct of the meeting. The details of the controversy are perhaps less important except to underline that in India Pakistan relations, things can go off track for totally unanticipated reasons. The meeting itself was subsequently overshadowed by news reports (subsequently officially confirmed) that the Indian and Pakistani National Security Advisors had met secretly in Bangkok in the last week of December. There have been subsequent reports that possibly more than one such meeting may have taken place in the recent past.

Notwithstanding these contacts the relationship remains frozen. Serious clashes continue on the LOC with no visible diminution in their intensity. The other area where the plateau in the relationship is well illustrated is in the areas of people to people contacts. A reply to a Parliament question revealed that India had issued about 18,000 fewer visas to Pakistani nationals in 2017 as compared to 2016. (Approximately 34000 visas in 2017 as opposed to 52,000 in 2016.) The absolute numbers for both years are substantially lower than in the past. Press reports cited the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi as claiming that it had issued about 45,000 visas to Indian nationals in 2017. If this is indeed so, 2017 would be one of the rare years (perhaps the only such) when more Indians have travelled to Pakistan than travel in the other direction.

**Sri Lanka:** The Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa made a two day scheduled visit to Sri Lanka in mid-January underlining that some of Pakistan's SAARC relationships quietly continue to expand even as relationships with other neighbours- Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan- flounder.

**Japan:** The Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono visited Pakistan in the first week of January – the first in about nine years.

**China:** The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), announced on 2 January that the country will henceforth be conducting all trade and investments with China in Chinese Yuan (CNY). Coming as it did in the wake of the famous U S Presidential tweet, the announcement had a certain dramatic force but it has in fact been under discussion for some time. The step insulates the Pakistan China economic relationship from Pakistan's US dollar travails (due to overall trade imbalance in terms of Pakistan's global exports and imports). Nevertheless, the generic issue of the severe imbalance in Pakistan China trade with a huge trade surplus in China's favour remains. In the current year Pakistan exported goods and services worth approximately \$1.6 billion while imports from China were \$10.5bn.

## **Internal:**

Former PM Nawaz Sharif has maintained his postures of defiance and on at least one occasion drew parallels between the present situation (including his judicial unseating) with 1971 and the breakup of Pakistan. He was also to comment, possibly more than once, that his political problems in his recent tenure as Prime Minister began with the decision to pursue a judicial case against General Musharraf for disrupting the constitutional order. Such defiance has been characteristic of the former PM's strategy over the past few months. At the same time, the intensity of the political campaign against him has also increased with the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik i Insaf (PTI) often acting in tandem. His party's strength and presence in Punjab was however demonstrated by a by election in Chakwal which the PML (N) candidate won with a handsome margin. Although this seat has traditionally been with the PML(N) this election settled some doubts about Nawaz Sharif's grass roots support having eroded since his unseating. In the Chakwal election the PPP had supported the PTI candidate. What is also of interest is that the PML (N) margin of victory would have been even larger but for the relatively strong showing by the Barelvi front that has been in the news recently- Tehreek-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah.

Along with Nawaz Sharif's defiance his political problems are also growing. Apart from the continuing judicial scrutiny since the Supreme Court ruled against him, the Chief Minister of Baluchistan from his party faced a motion of no confidence after a sudden depletion in the number of his supporters in the Assembly. Baluchistan is monitored with interest because of the widespread view, in the PML (N) and its supporters at least, that a conspiracy is afoot to ensure that the elections to the Senate do not take place as scheduled in March, 2018. This, it is believed, will prevent the next Senate having a large PML (N) representation as reflective of its present strength in provincial and the national assembly. In any event the Baluchistan crisis has abated through the expedient of the Chief Minister resigning rather than losing the vote of no confidence and the assembly being dissolved. This has enabled a consensus candidate (not from the PML (N) being installed in his place. Speculation over the fate of the Senate elections however refuses to die out.

Nawaz Sharif also faces problems in Punjab (where his brother and possible successor) is Chief Minister. Here a street agitation has been launched by the Canadian-Pakistani preacher (also a Barelvi) Tahir ul Qadri demanding resignation of the provincial government. The agitation will possibly model itself on the Islamabad protests of December and the aim being to mount as much pressure as possible on the PML (N) citadel and then see what transpires. Tahir ul Qadri's agitation has some amount of support from the PPP and Imran Khan's party. His maverick appearances in Pakistan street politics are usually related to the state of relations between the military and Nawaz Sharif.

**Internal Security:** Terrorist attacks continued and one in Quetta on 9 January, in the midst of the Baluchistan assembly crisis, led to 7 fatal casualties including 5 policemen. What is unusual about this attack is that a briefing was held in the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad the following day for foreign Ambassadors by the Chief of General Staff Lt Gen Bilal Akbar. The latter said that "the terrorist attack had been traced back to Afghanistan". A subsequent statement from the Foreign Office said that the Ambassadors "were also briefed about the terrorist threat emanating from the safe havens and

sanctuaries in Afghanistan... Details were also provided on how Indian belligerence and unhelpful posturing is distracting Pakistan's counter terrorism efforts and how an active RAW/NDS nexus is verifiably working to undermine Pakistan's internal stability."

Over 2017 as a whole the record of terrorist attacks is mixed. Data compiled by a Islamabad think tank shows that in 2017 there were more suicide attacks than in the previous two years although overall incidence of terrorist attacks reduced in 2017. Balochistan and the Tribal Areas (FATA) saw the highest incidence of militant attacks.

**Other Developments:** The Palestine Ambassador in Pakistan found himself summarily recalled after he appeared in a Difa-e Pakistan (Defence of Pakistan) rally with the (Jama'at-ud-Da'wah) JUD self-styled Emir Hafiz Saeed.

27th December was the 10th anniversary of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi. Alongside the poignancy of the anniversary was a war of words between Bilawal Bhutto and General (ret'd) Parvez Musharraf. Bilawal Bhutto repeated earlier accusations that Musharraf was the 'killer' of his mother while addressing supporters at Garhi Khuda Bux the Bhutto family graveyard. Counteraccusations followed from Musharraf accusing Asif Ali Zardari and subsequently saying that rogue elements may have been elements within the establishment who conspired with the Taliban to murder former prime minister Benazir Bhutto but that this was only a 'hunch'. It will be recalled that Musharraf was declared an absconder in August 2017 by an Anti-Terrorism Court in Islamabad which also ordered seizure of his properties.

---

### III Developments in Afghanistan

#### External:

**China:** The first trilateral dialogue between China, Afghanistan and Pakistan's foreign ministers was held in Beijing in the last week of December. It will be recalled that this trilateral mechanism was set up following a determined Chinese effort to mediate tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan which had flared up in June 2017 leading to a visit by the Chinese Foreign Minister to both countries. After the meeting, the Chinese Foreign Minister was quoted as saying that the three parties had reached complete consensus in fighting terrorism, and that China would also "fully leverage" Xinjiang as a base for economic cooperation with the bordering countries. He was also quoted to the effect that China and Pakistan are planning to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan: "In the long run, through Afghanistan, we will gradually connect the CPEC with the China-Central and Western Asia Economic Corridor."

According to press reports Afghanistan will host the second dialogue in Kabul in 2018.

**Pakistan Afghanistan Border Fencing:** An issue of great sensitivity in Afghanistan is the fencing being put up by the Pakistan military on sections of the Af Pak border. A Pakistan press report said that the first phase of the project should be completed by the end of 2018 and envisages the fencing of 432km at the most critical points along the border. The second phase, would see the fencing of another stretch of 400km. Fencing operations have often led to local clashes between border guards on both sides.

**Responses to US statements on Pakistan:** As expected responses to the strong US statements on Pakistan (see Pakistan section above) were uniformly positive. A presidential spokesman said following the US President's tweet that "the justified stance of the Afghan government nation regarding the sources and reasons of the ongoing conflict has been proved due to the joint and consolidated efforts by the Afghan and US officials as well as the international allies of Afghanistan" and that "world leaders now have an understanding regarding the roots of the Afghan conflict and insisted that this will help the Afghan government to engage on government to government level with Pakistan for peace process."

#### Internal:

**Balkh Governor:** The removal of the Governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammad Noor was a development dominating internal politics from the second half of December. Noor is an ethnic Tadjik who has held the

position since 2004. He has been a central figure in Northern Afghanistan apart from being one of the leaders of the Jamiat-i-Islami political party, which holds half the seats in the coalition government. Atta Mohammad however has refused to step down until government reaches an agreement with Jamiat-e-Islami party and while there have been numerous negotiations, no solution as yet has appeared. The risk that this feuding may add to Afghanistan's political instability was underlined by a statement from the US Vice President on 17 January. According to a statement from the vice president's office, Pence emphasized to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani by telephone "his support for the Afghan government to engage with Balkh Governor Atta and conduct a peacefully negotiated transition of leadership."

**Internal Security:** A terrorist attack on a Shia cultural centre in Kabul in end December illustrated the continuing crisis in internal security in Afghanistan. Forty-one people were killed and many more injured. The Islamic State claimed responsibility. This attack is only the latest in a series targeting Shias in Afghanistan - in October a Shia mosque was attacked killing more than 50 worshippers. The precariousness of the security situation was further underlined by a terrorist attack followed by a 12 hour siege in Kabul in the International hotel on the 20th of January.

**Other Developments:** Representatives of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), made a three-day visit in mid-January. The last such visit was in 2010.

---

*(The views expressed are personal)*

---