

A new Af-Pak season?

Published at October 10, 2017 01:13 AM [0Comment\(s\)](#)884views



Early October, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in Kabul met a delegation from Pakistan led by its Chief of Army Staff Gen Qamar Bajwa. Both discussed a host of issues “including security in the region, bilateral relationship, peace and stability, anti-terror efforts, business and transit relationship, and mid and long-term ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Ghani at the end of the above discussion was quoted to have called the meeting as a “new season of relationship.”

Is Pakistan and Afghanistan ready for a “new season”? Are there going to be new actors in this new Af-Pak season? Are the major actors in the Af-Pak willing to enter into a new season? Are there going to be new issues? Will there be a new plot?

The old seasons had a similar plot during Ghani and Karzai’s periods: an attempt towards rapprochement, violence along and across the Durand Line, accusation of the other for not doing enough to control violence, humanitarian incident/episode on the Af-Pak border points and a repeat of the same. Devastating militant attacks, including those suicide ones, drone attacks with or without collateral damage and occasional cross-border firings added a twist to the above plot.

Politically, the US statements and actions including drawdown and surge, and the American demands to “do more” on Afghanistan and Pakistan further added color to the plot, increasing the anxiety to know what would happen next. In between there would be another façade – of an internal discussion on talking to Taliban and an actual talking with the Afghan Taliban – in Doha or elsewhere.

The plot would continue. Following the failure of the above talks and after a set of terrorist attacks, the US would issue a threat at the highest level against Pakistan’s non-cooperation in fighting militant groups in Afghanistan. For the next few weeks, Pakistan would try to put in a strategy of appeasing the US – few arrests and raids, and handing over of couple of top militant leaders, especially belonging to al Qaeda. After few weeks, things would go back to their old position.

The previous sessions in Af-Pak region, almost had the above repeating in different permutations and combinations.

How different will the new season be?

Pakistan and the “New Season”

For Pakistan, is this a new season? Does it perceive so? Did Gen Qamar Bajwa visit Kabul with an objective to start a new relationship? Or the visit was under pressure from the US?

The visit, it appears, was forced on Afghanistan, than a planned bilateral one, with a set of issues and a well-defined agenda. News reports in Pakistan before the visit projected the focus of discussion to include border relations including border fencing, and militancy. These issues have become prominent in the recent years between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The above issues have assumed a perennial nature in Pak-Afghan relations and there was no need for a high-level delegation, especially led by Pakistan’s Army Chief. A recent chronology of visits from Pakistan would reveal a different story for the actual reasons behind the visit of Pakistan’s Army Chief to Kabul.

Last month, following Trump’s statement on Afghan surge, Pakistan’s foreign minister Asif Khawaja visited the US and met with different people and think tanks to understand the American pulse. Immediately after Gen Bajwa’s visit to Afghanistan, he left for the US again for a formal meeting with the high officials. In between, there was a National Security Council meeting in Pakistan and a Corps Commander meeting. All the above meetings taking place in a matter of two weeks tell a story. Clearly, Gen Bajwa’s visit to Afghanistan has a larger Pak-US plot, aimed at new US-Pak season, than an Af-Pak one.

Consider the following. Last month, the American President came with a new strategy towards Afghanistan. Three issues were of importance from a Pakistani perspective. First, against the predominant expectation, Trump did not decide to walk away from Afghanistan. Instead, he has decided to push further in Afghanistan. When Pakistan was expecting an American withdrawal, there is a new surge.

Certainly, an American surge in Afghanistan is not what Pakistan had anticipated. Both Pakistan and its “militant stooges” in Afghanistan – the Taliban and the Haqqani network were expecting the American withdrawal, leading to a collapse of the Afghan government. Such a scenario is favourable for them to wait and finally take over. Now, an American surge means, the Afghan government will continue and the Americans are not going to let the government fall. Not letting this government fall is the essence of Trump’s strategy as well.

The second issue that has really upset Islamabad is Trump’s position on Pakistan and its support for militant groups. His statement was harsh on Pakistan; so was his threat of withdrawing the support from Pakistan. Though the political leadership would rhetorically talk about “we don’t need American aid”, it is more of an empty chest thumping for a local audience. Why would Asif Khawaja run to the US, that too twice in a matter of weeks? Pakistan cannot afford to antagonize the US at this moment and ask Trump to get lost. Can they?

Third issue in the Trump's surge statement that has really upset Pakistan is his invitation to India to play a larger role in Afghanistan. Trump has touched a raw nerve. Given the increasing Indo-Afghan relations, and India's interest to expand its footprint in Afghanistan even further, Pakistan perceives India in Afghanistan as a greater threat.

Repairing the relations with the US is essential. Rhetoric aside, Pakistan has to be seen "doing more" before it could restart the negotiation process with the US. And to restart the discussions and repair the relations with the US, Pakistan needs to do something more at the ground level. Especially with two high profile visits from the US forthcoming during late October, it is important for Pakistan to have a face saving in Afghanistan.

So, far Pakistan this may not be a "New Season". They are buying time.

Afghanistan and the New Season

If a "New Season" is not an Endgame or even a strategy towards it for Pakistan, is it for Afghanistan?

Ashraf Ghani does not have multiple options. Undoubtedly, the Afghan security forces have been improving and expanding in size. But, they are yet to control the entire territory of Afghanistan. It would take some more time.

Also for Afghanistan, the Trump surge is great news, but also comes with a rider. Trump is keen to strengthen the Afghan security in the short term; but he was clear in his Afghan statement – that he is not going to nation build Afghanistan. That job – he has made it clear – rests with Afghanistan. Nation building process in Afghanistan needs more time. Ghani cannot achieve much, given the inherent governance issues within Afghanistan, corruption being one amongst them. There are other governance issues as well – from strengthening democratic process to building institutions.

In this context, certainly Afghanistan cannot afford to take on the Afghan Taliban, Haqqani network and Pakistan. For Ghani, the immediate imperative is to take control all the Afghan provinces. Not only to take control, but also to provide governance both in day and in night. It appears, that the Afghan forces are able to press forward during the day, but in the nights there is another rule, especially in southern and eastern provinces.

Afghanistan would need more time as well. So Ghani's "New Season" could very well be a strategy to buy more time.

So the "new season" that Ghani has hinted, may not be a season at all. Just a déjà vu.