

ISAS Working Paper

No. 179 - 11 November 2013

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The Pakistan-US Parleys

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Abstract

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's recent state visit to Washington was essentially a "get to know" encounter with United States President Barack Obama. Pakistan's new leader – sworn into office on 5 June 2013 following a thumping victory scored by his party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in the elections of 11 May – had inherited a difficult situation from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government that had ruled for five years from 2008 to 2013. Among the problems the new prime minister faced was a serious cooling-off of relations with the United States, long a Pakistani benefactor. Sharif's main objective was to reverse the trend and establish a working relationship with America. He succeeded in that objective. The detailed statement issued by the two governments following the talks between the two leaders spelled out the measures that were to be taken by Islamabad and Washington to have a business-like relationship between the two nations.

Introduction

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The visit to Washington by Nawaz Sharif from 20-24 October 2013 was the third foreign trip undertaken by the newly elected Prime Minister of Pakistan after he assumed office on 5 June. His first visit was to China that began on 3 July and took him to several cities besides Beijing, the capital. Pakistan had been calling China an “all-weather friend” ever since America suddenly disengaged itself from Pakistan and Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union’s troops from Afghanistan. In 1998 the US imposed strict sanctions against Islamabad after Pakistan tested nuclear bombs following similar tests by India a few weeks earlier. The decision to go nuclear was taken by Nawaz Sharif when he was in his second term (February 1997-October 1999) as Prime Minister. The sanctions severely damaged the Pakistani economy. Calling China an “all-weather friend” was to underscore, by contrast, Pakistan’s on-and-off relations with the United States.

During the China visit, Sharif and members of his team signed a number of “memoranda of understanding” including one aimed at developing a 2,000-km China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This will connect the Pakistani port of Gwadar with the resource-rich autonomous region of Xinjiang in west China.² His second trip took him to Saudi Arabia, a country with which he had strong personal relations. He had spent the first part of his seven-year exile in the Kingdom after being forced to leave Pakistan by General Pervez Musharraf. The general had overthrown Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (then in his second term at the helm) after he made a clumsy attempt to remove Musharraf from the position of Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff.³ The general went on to govern the country for almost nine years, heading Pakistan’s fourth military-led administration.

The earlier plans for organising a meeting between US President Barack Obama and Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013 were given up in favour of a state visit to Washington. An opportunity for this visit by the Pakistani leader opened up when the Argentinean President cancelled her visit to protest against the reports that her country was one of the several states which the United States had spied on. The governments in Washington and Islamabad had concluded that a long visit by the Pakistani Prime Minister would be productive since the agenda covered a number of important items.

The Visit

Sharif spent four days in the American capital arriving there on Sunday, 20 October, and returning home on the 24th of the month. He opened his visit with an address at the United States

² Shahid Javed Burki, “China’s ‘Look-West Policy’: A New Link with Pakistan”, ISAS Brief No. 293, 20 August, 2013.

³ General Pervez Musharraf provides a detailed account of this episode in his book, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, New York Free Press, 2006.

Institute of Peace and followed by a working dinner hosted by US Secretary of State John Kerry. Before meeting President Obama later, Sharif had a breakfast meeting with Vice-President Joe Biden. He also held a session with the Pakistan-American Business Council and met the members of the Pakistani community at a function held in the Pakistani embassy in Washington. In the talk at the Business Council, he urged American businessmen to invest in his country and look at Pakistan, given its size and location, as an attractive opportunity. However, he did not downplay the problem created for investors by a serious deterioration in Pakistan's law and order situation.

He took advantage of the meeting with the Pakistani community to announce that he was appointing Jaleel Abbas Jilani as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States.⁴ Sharif had taken more than four months to fill that important position. It was rumoured at one point that the prime minister might send General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani to Washington as the ambassador. The general was to complete his tenure as the Chief of Army Staff that had lasted six years. on 29 November. Kayani's choice would have made sense since he had developed good working relations with several senior military personnel in the United States.⁵ The Americans may have also wanted Kayani to represent Pakistan in Washington during the complex US pullout from Afghanistan in 2014. However, the general pulled his name out of any such calculation by issuing a formal statement on 6 October, two weeks before Nawaz Sharif embarked on his US visit.⁶ According to the statement issued by the Pakistan Army headquarters, not only will Kayani retire from the Army, he would not accept any government appointment.

Prime Minister's 'To-Do' List

Sharif began his latest prime ministerial term with a long "to-do list". The economy was performing poorly with the rate of GDP growth stuck at about three per cent a year. This was four percentage points lower than that required. The estimate was made by the International Monetary Fund by using an elasticity of employment of 0.55, meaning that for a one percentage point increase in the national product, employment would increase by 0.55 per cent. Since the size of the work force was increasing at the rate of three per cent, national income had to increase by seven per cent to find jobs for the new entrants to the already-large workforce. There was a large fiscal deficit, with poor tax collection and uncontrolled expenditure by the government on current consumption rather than on development. This had created serious

⁴ Jilani, a career diplomat, was serving as Foreign Secretary in Islamabad, the most-senior position in the diplomatic service of which he was a member. Earlier in his career, he had served as First Secretary in the Pakistani embassy in Washington and also as Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi.

⁵ For an account of General Kayani's relations with the senior members of the Obama administration, see David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power*, New York, Broadway, 2013.

⁶ Farhan Bokhari, "General's orderly departure is time for Pakistan to rejoice", *Financial Times*, 7 October 2013, p. 4.

shortages of such vital production inputs as electricity and natural gas. Balance of payments deficit had increased significantly, with exports performing poorly. Large payments were due to the country's creditors, most notably the IMF. But the state of the economy was not the only worry the new prime minister had to deal with.

Relations with the United States had deteriorated in 2011-12. There was considerable agitation in Pakistan, sparked by what Islamabad regarded as a series of breaches of Pakistani sovereignty. In January 2011, Raymond Davis, a CIA operative shot dead two young men in broad daylight on a busy Lahore street. Davis claimed that the men approached his car on a motorbike intending to rob him. The government believed that Davis was keeping a watch on the banned organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba and the men he murdered probably belonged to the militant group. "We found a lot of material in his car relating to the Lashkar collected on the day of the incident", Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif told me in a conversation that took place in his Lahore office while Davis was languishing in jail. The second incident occurred on 2 May when an American Navy Seals group flew in helicopters from Jalalabad, Afghanistan to Abbottabad deep inside the Pakistani territory. The team was despatched to kill Osama bin Laden who had spent several years in a large house in a well-guarded compound not far from the Pakistan Military Academy. Bin Laden was killed and his body was flown back to Jalalabad. It was only after the operation had been successfully completed that President Obama placed a call to President Asif Ali Zardari to inform him of what the Americans had accomplished. This was a huge embarrassment for the Pakistani military as well as the civilian authorities in Islamabad. In late November, the Americans bombed a Pakistani military base in the village of Salala near the border with Afghanistan. More than two dozen Pakistani soldiers died in the incident which the United States command in Afghanistan described as an accident. The series of incidents created pressure on Islamabad to act to show its displeasure. It did that by stopping the flow of American traffic through Pakistan to Afghanistan. Hundreds of US vehicles had moved through Pakistan carrying supplies to the American forces operating in landlocked Afghanistan. The Pakistani Government also ordered the closure of an airbase in Shamsi in Baluchistan. This had been used by the CIA to launch drones that were operating in the skies above the tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan.

Washington had its own irritations. Foremost among them was Islamabad's reluctance – sometimes even refusal – to rein in a variety of terrorist groups that were attacking and harassing the American troops fighting in Afghanistan. Washington retaliated by blocking the flow of badly needed economic and military assistance to Pakistan. These groups were operating from the sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas that border Afghanistan. In addition to restoring relations with the United States, Nawaz Sharif was also anxious to improve relations with Afghanistan and India. The ten-year-old cease-fire along the Line of Control that divided the contested state of Jammu and Kashmir was being regularly violated, with significant loss of lives on both sides of the border.

Perhaps the most difficult issue Sharif faced was a steady deterioration in the law and order situation which resulted from the activities of a number of extremist groups that were operating in the country almost uncontrolled. Their activities were taking a heavy human toll. Sectarian strife had become rampant with Sunni extremist groups carrying out strikes against the minorities including the Shia and Christian communities. In two attacks, one in Quetta and the other in Karachi in January 2013, the Sunni extremists killed more than 200 people. Violence in Karachi had reached the point where the civilian authorities declared that it was beyond their power to control the gangs that were operating against each other and also against innocent civilians. Some of them were using “targeted killings” to eliminate the people they identified as their enemies. On 4 September Nawaz Sharif called a meeting of his cabinet in Karachi and decided to hand over several law and order functions to the Rangers, an arm of the military that normally operates under the direction of the civilian authorities. “Maybe the police are not capable of dealing with crime and terrorism”, the prime minister told the cabinet. “The responsibility to improve law and order in the city should be given to the Rangers”.

Setting Tone for the Obama-Sharif Meeting

“The White House has set a warm tone for the Obama-Sharif session, officially stating that the meeting would highlight the ‘resilience of the US-Pakistan relationship’ and further the cooperation on trade and economic development, regional stability and countering extremism”, wrote Thom Shanker for *The New York Times*.⁷ The story appeared as Pakistan’s Prime Minister left for Washington for his first meeting with the US President.

The tone for the Obama-Sharif meeting was set by the announcement that Washington had plans to unfreeze more than US\$ 1.5 billion in assistance that was blocked because of the tensions between the two nations caused by a series of events detailed above. There were some in Washington who believed that money for the cash-starved nation could be used to pull Pakistan back into the orbit around the United States. “The official notifications from the State Department to Congress required to release the funds were sent over this summer long before the planned [Sharif] visit”, continued Shanker.

Pakistan in the Asian Context

This was the first time President Obama was turning his attention to Asia after having dealt with the crisis at home that brought his country close to a default on its debt obligations. The government shutdown that began on 1 October and lasted for 16 days took a heavy toll on

⁷ Thom Shanker, “Aid to Pakistan to resume as tensions with U.S. ease”, *The New York Times*, 19 October, 2013, p. A1.

Obama's declared "pivot to Asia" policy.⁸ The president had to cancel his visit to Asia, where he was to attend two important summits, in order to stay home and deal with the financial crisis. He told the press that his grounding was a setback for renewed American leadership in the Asian region. "It creates a sense of concern on the part of other leaders", Obama said. "It's like me not showing up for my own party".

His absence created an opportunity for China. According to Michael Crowley of *Time* magazine, "happy to console the disappointed heads of state in Bali was China's President, Xi Jinping, who was the unchallenged heavyweight among the gathered Asian leaders".⁹ Although he would have preferred a location other than Washington and a leader other than Nawaz Sharif to renew America's effort to engage more fully with Asia, the meeting with the Pakistani leader gave the American leader the opportunity to turn his attention and that of his country towards the continent that was experiencing one of the greatest economic expansions in history. In fact beginning the re-engagement with Pakistan served a purpose. The country was critical for the American effort to clean the slate in Afghanistan. Islamabad was also a player in helping China to increase its economic and military clout in the Asian continent. In a way Pakistan also mattered since it had become, along with Turkey, a model which the unsettled political systems in the Arab countries could follow. Both countries had managed to develop political orders that were no longer overwhelmed by the presence of the military or the pull of political Islam.

Financial Aid for Pakistan

The release of the blocked US funds was timely for Pakistan as it continued to struggle on the economic front. Since Sharif assumed office on 5 June, his government had concentrated its attention on stabilising the economy. This meant a series of efforts including the earlier-than-expected negotiation of a large programme with the International Monetary Fund. The IMF programme was set to provide Pakistan with total financial flows of US\$ 12 billion over a three-year period. Of this, US\$ 6.64 billion was to be provided by the Fund from its Extended Fund Facility. The first tranche of US\$ 544.4 million was released within hours of the approval by the institution's board on 4 September. The Fund was hopeful about Pakistan's long-term prospect. In the press release issued after the institution's board had given its approval, it said that "despite the challenges it faces, Pakistan is a country of abundant potential, given its location and its rich human and natural resources. The authorities' program is expected to help the economy to rebound, forestall a balance of payments crisis and rebuild reserves, reduce the fiscal deficit, and

⁸ For a detailed discussion of President Obama's policy towards Asia see my three Working Papers published by the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. President Barack Obama in Asia – Searching the Basis for a Partnership, ISAS Working Paper No. 102, 7 December 2009; President Obama's World in His Second Term, ISAS Working Paper No. 164, 6 February 2013; and America's Asia Policy, ISAS Working Paper No. 139, 13 January 2012.

⁹ Michael Crowley, "Make way for China", *Time* 21, October 2013, p. 24.

undertake comprehensive structural reforms to boost investment and growth. Adherence to the program is also expected to catalyze resources from other donors”.¹⁰

Some of the More Important Issues

With the question of the resumption of US aid behind them, the leaders in their Washington meeting could spend time on four other important issues. All were important for Pakistan – Afghanistan after the withdrawal by the US of its combat troops; relations with India; Islamabad-Beijing relations; and in terms of the future of Afghanistan the use of the Pakistani territory for terrorist activities.

Afghanistan’s Future

To quote once again from *The New York Times*’ Thom Shanker, “American officials believed that Pakistan can play a key role in efforts to draw the Afghan Taliban into peace talks, yet remain suspicious of the Pakistani military’s links to certain militant factions such as the Haqqani network that has carried many attacks on Western and Afghan troops inside Afghanistan”.¹¹ But Washington was not sympathetic to Pakistan’s view that if the pullout from Afghanistan left that country in chaos, the Haqqani network would work as insurance. It would help prevent Afghanistan, after America, from becoming hostile to Pakistan.

However, under Sharif, Pakistan appeared to be supportive of other aspects of the American policy concerning Afghanistan. Several senior Pakistani officials claimed that it was their effort and prolonged discussions that led to the Americans to conclude that the use of force would not bring peace to Afghanistan. A way had to be found to bring in the Taliban – in particular the group that operated from Quetta, Pakistan, under Mullah Mohammad Omar – into the still-evolving political order. Direct negotiations had to be conducted with this group, and Islamabad had urged that the Taliban should be allowed to open an office outside the Afghan-Pakistan territories to be used as the base for starting a dialogue with the Americans. An office was opened in Doha, the capital of Qatar, but by treating it as a quasi-embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the name they had given the country when they ruled it for five years (1996-2001), they managed to thoroughly alienate the mercurial President of Afghanistan. To facilitate the process of negotiations, Pakistan had begun to release some of the Taliban leaders who were in its custody. On 21 September, Pakistan set free Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the 45-year old

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, “IMF Executive Board Approves 3-Year, US\$ 6.64 Billion Extended Fund Arrangement for Pakistan”, Press Release, No. 13/322, September 4, 2013.

¹¹ Thom Shanker, “Aid to Pakistan to resume as tensions with U.S. ease”, *The New York Times*, 19 October, 2013, p. A1.

co-founder of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. He had worked as Mullah Omar's deputy, and it was believed that he could serve as an important bridge between Kabul and Omar.

There were other positive developments. During a visit to Kabul by John Kerry, the US and Afghan governments agreed on the terms of a security arrangement that would allow the US to keep several thousand troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014. They will not be used for combat but for the purpose of training the Afghan troops.¹² Pakistan was anxious that such a contingent should be in position to prevent the collapse of the Afghan state which could happen with the American withdrawal. Islamabad was afraid of the type of chaos that followed the 1989 pullout by the Soviet Union. There was also concern in Islamabad that the American withdrawal of troops would be followed by a sharp reduction in the financial aid Washington had provided Kabul. Pakistan was an indirect beneficiary of the aid to Afghanistan. Its large trade surplus with Kabul was financed from the aid received from the Western donors, in particular the United States.¹³

Relations with India

Immediately upon assuming office for the second time – in February 1997 – Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared his intention to improve relations with India. He was anxious that in his second term as prime minister all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan should be resolved. Having been a businessman once, he knew the rewards that would come Pakistan's way by developing strong relations with India, one of Pakistan's two large neighbours.¹⁴ He persuaded Atal Behari Vajpayee, his then counterpart in New Delhi, to take the bus from the border city of Amritsar in India to Lahore, the capital of the Pakistani province of Punjab. Lahore was also a border city, only a few dozen miles from Amritsar. The meeting between the two prime ministers led to the signing of the "Lahore Declaration" in which India and Pakistan pledged to settle their disputes through dialogue. By recognising that Kashmir was a dispute, the Indians were conceding a long-standing Pakistani demand that the status of the state could not be treated as settled. That several Indian analysts continue to place the Kashmir dispute within

¹² Matthew Rosenberg, "Talks clear path for US-Afghan deal on troops", *The New York Times*, 12 October 2013, p. A1.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the developing economic links between Afghanistan and Pakistan, see Shahid Javed Burki, *Economics of Pak-Afghan Relations*, Institute of South Asian Studies, Working Paper No 176, October 2013.

¹⁴ I estimated the benefits that would accrue to Pakistan if the proportion of the country's total trade going to India reached a level as in 1947-49 before the first trade war between the two countries. See Shahid Javed Burki, *South Asia in the New World Order: The Role of Regional Cooperation*, London, Routledge, 2011.

quotation marks is one indication of the distance the two sides have to travel to achieve an understanding.¹⁵

However, Sharif did not seem to have consulted his country's army leadership about his approach to India. By launching the "Kargil operation", General Pervez Musharraf not only managed to scuttle the peace effort launched by his prime minister but brought the two countries close to a full-scale war. It was only with US President Bill Clinton's intervention, when Sharif went over to Washington and met the American leader, that the matter was resolved. The meeting with Clinton was held on 4 July 1999, the American Independence Day. The fact that the American President agreed to meet Sharif on a major holiday was one indication of the nervousness in Washington about the deteriorating situation in South Asia. The American President, after talking to Prime Minister Vajpayee, was able to de-escalate tension between the two nuclear powers. Clinton promised to take personal interest in the Kashmir issue – a promise that was meant to save face for the beleaguered Pakistani Prime Minister since the Indians had always resisted the idea of third-party involvement in settling any of the disputes with Pakistan.¹⁶

With Sharif working once again to develop a good economic relationship with India now, he was being distracted by the latest escalation of tensions along the Line of Control that separates the two parts of Kashmir. Why the ten-year ceasefire came to be breached has led to a number of conspiracy theories. As Suryanarayana explains in his above-cited ISAS Insights, there are some in India who have begun to talk of "Second Kargil" meaning that the Pakistani Army had now decided to liven up the effective Kashmir border in order to prevent the Pakistani Prime Minister from making peace with India. This was also the line taken by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his 29 September meeting with Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York. He informed the members of the press team travelling with him on his way back from Beijing that he had spoken clearly and bluntly with his Pakistani counterpart. "I have not become Prime Minister of India to redraw the boundary", he told the Pakistani leader. The Indian press described this as Singh's Churchillian moment, reminiscent of the British leader's declaration in 1942 that he had not become the King's first minister to "preside over the liquidation of the Empire". According to Indian reports, Singh's assertiveness "surprised senior aides as the PM brushed aside Sharif's arguments".¹⁷

There was nothing new in Singh's position. In a meeting with me in his office in New Delhi in December 2005, the Indian Prime Minister asked me how well I knew President Musharraf. When I said that I knew him reasonably well, he said I should pass on to the Pakistani leader a message. He said that he had met the Pakistani President a couple of times at some international

¹⁵ One example of this practice is evident in an ISAS paper by P S Suryanarayana, "Back to the Basics in Indo-Pak Puzzle", ISAS Insights No. 232, 14 October 2013.

¹⁶ A detailed account of the meeting is in Strobe Talbot, *Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy and the Bomb*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

¹⁷ Rajeev Deshpande, "Haven't become PM of India to redraw the border: Manmohan Singh to Nawaz Sharif", *The Times of India*, 26 October 2013, p. 3.

gatherings. “In my first meeting with him I said that both of us were accidental leaders. Neither of us expected to lead our nations. Given where we were we should do something for our people. We should make peace and improve the lives of our people. Musharraf responded by raising the Kashmir issue and drawing new boundary lines that reflected ethnic divisions in the state. I told him that was a futile position to take. No democratically elected leader of a nation will ever consider redrawing the boundaries of the state”. I passed the message on to President Musharraf who confirmed that such an exchange had indeed taken place.

But relations between the two countries did not go in the way Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had wished. His first year in office saw the countries come together in several unprecedented ways. As Shahan Mufti recalls in *The Faithful Scribe: A Story of Islam, Pakistan, Family and War*, “I arrived in India in the fall of 2004 when relations between the two South Asian nuclear powers had never been better. Pakistan and India had fought four wars, once nearly every decade since the two countries became independent in 1947, but in the months before my arrival, Pakistan and India inaugurated a bus and train line connecting Lahore and Delhi, India and Pakistan opened a nuclear hotline in case of any misunderstanding regarding the countries’ nuclear weapons. Most important the two countries had started playing cricket against each other for the first time since the tit-for-tat nuclear tests of 1998”.¹⁸

While both the government and the public in India held the view that Pakistan – in particular the country’s army – was behind the ceasefire violations that had grown in intensity since Sharif had taken office recently, there was the opposite impression in Pakistan. In the discussions I had with several senior leaders in Pakistan I came across the belief that the Indian Army was behind the violations. It was not keen to see the two countries moving towards peaceful coexistence.

Relations with China

While Washington was watching with some concern Pakistan’s developing relations with China, especially the agreement signed between Beijing and Islamabad on building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it is unlikely that it received much attention in the private conversation between Obama and Sharif. With that said, the Americans would not like to see the CPEC give the Chinese Navy a presence in the deep-water port of Gwadar. Were that to happen, India will be concerned as well. According to Christabel Neo, “most recently the ‘String of Pearls’ garnered renewed attention through Pakistan’s official transfer of operational rights of the deep-sea port in its Baluchistan province to the state-run China Overseas Holding Company”. Dubbed as the crowning jewel in the string, Gwadar’s geographic advantages – a mere 400 kilometres away from the Strait of Hormuz – certainly suggest the possibility of investing it with great strategic military importance. The term China’s “String of Pearls” strategy was coined nearly a

¹⁸ Shahan Mufti, *The Faithful Scribe: A Story of Islam, Pakistan, Family and War*, New York, Other Press, 2013.

decade ago in a Booz Allen report for the Pentagon to describe the perceived encirclement of India in the Indian Ocean Region. Continues Neo: “Pakistan is believed to have made known its intention to develop Gwadar with military projection capabilities – through repeated requests to China to build the port as a naval base. While the focus is on undertakings by the Pakistani Navy, it does not preclude the possible usage by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) forces. Furthermore, the long-standing Sino-Pakistani alliance has created a level of trust that can facilitate inter-operability between the two navies, particularly vis-a-vis India”.¹⁹

Domestic Terrorism

One task before Sharif was to convince the American leadership that in dealing with terrorism Pakistan had to walk a narrow and difficult line. An All Parties’ Conference convened by Prime Minister Sharif on 9 September authorised the federal government to deal with extremists by initiating a “dialogue with all stakeholders forthwith and for this purpose take all necessary steps as it may deem fit, including development of an appropriate mechanism and identification of interlocutors”.²⁰ Interpreting this call for negotiations as a sign of weakness, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) listed its conditions for talking to the government. These included the withdrawal of government troops from all tribal areas, release of all prisoners taken into custody under the Terrorism Act, and forcing the United States to immediately terminate its drone programme. As if to underscore its resolve, a group that called itself *Ansarul Mujahideen*, supposedly an affiliate of the TTP, carried out a suicide bombing attack that killed Israrullah Gandapur, the 38-year old Minister of Law in the government of the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The KP government was in the hands of Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the party that had been the strongest advocate of dealing with extremist activities through negotiations.

A day before the meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Sharif, two human rights groups released their reports on the use of drones in the mountains of Pakistan and Yemen. Both reached a number of damning conclusions which could not be ignored by the two leaders in their deliberations. Amnesty International has highlighted the case of a grandmother who was killed while she was picking vegetables and other incidents which could have broken international laws designed to protect civilians. The report was issued, at the same time as an investigation by Human Rights Watch which detailed missile attacks in Yemen which, the group believes, contravenes the laws of conflict, international human rights law and Barack Obama’s own guidelines on drones. But it is acknowledged that “getting to the bottom of individual strikes is exceptionally difficult in the areas bordering Afghanistan, where thousands of militants have

¹⁹ Christabel Neo, “China’s Gwadar Pearl: The port acquisition and implications for India”, ISAS Brief No. 288, 11 July 2013.

²⁰ *The News*, “Text of the APC resolution”, 10 September 2013, p. 19.

settled. People are often terrified of speaking out, fearing retribution from both militants and the state, which is widely suspected of colluding with the CIA-led campaign”.²¹

The Outcome

President Obama and Prime Minister Sharif met on 23 October in White House’s Oval Office for 90 minutes. It was a one-on-one meeting with no aides present. Once the talks were concluded, the two did not address a press conference as is the normal practice for these meetings. Instead, the press was called in with the two leaders sitting side by side. In the remarks – especially those by the American President – the focus was on terrorism and the future of Afghanistan following the American withdrawal. The use by the Americans of drones also figured prominently. According to Mark Lander who reported on the discussions for his newspaper, *The New York Times*, the American leader said that the two sides needed to find ways to fight terrorism “that respect Pakistan’s sovereignty, that respect the concerns of both countries. It’s a challenge; it’s not easy”. With that said, “we are committed to working together and making sure that rather than being source of tension between our two countries, it can be a source of strength for us working together in a constructive and respectful way”. The Pakistani leader seems to have left most of the talking to President Obama. Lander noted that “aside from the references to drones – delivered in a tone so soft that reporters in the room strained to hear him – Mr. Sharif also sounded conciliatory. Terrorism, he said, was a shared threat that required ‘serious efforts without indulging into any blame game’”.²²

Following the Oval Office talks the two governments issued a long “joint statement” that did not carry anything that was newsworthy. It had many details about the various areas in which the two capitals were doing collaborative work. “Reaffirming the strong relationship between the two countries, [the leaders] stressed that our enduring partnership is based on the principles of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity”. This was an indirect reference to Pakistan’s concern that the drone programme was violating its sovereignty. The leaders “discussed the forthcoming Ministerial-level Strategic Dialogue which Secretary Kerry would be hosting in Washington by March 2014. They also decided on the strategic priorities for the five working groups: 1) Law Enforcement and Counterterrorism; 2) Economics and Finance; 3) Energy; 4) Security, Strategic Stability and Non-Proliferation; and 5) the Defense Consultative Group”. There were several references to scourge of terrorism but there was also some recognition that Pakistan was seriously engaged in dealing with the situation. “President Obama commended the government and people of Pakistan, armed forces, and law enforcement agencies [for efforts] to defeat terrorists and praised Pakistan for its military campaign”. “They shared their mutual conviction that a stable and peaceful Pakistan-Afghanistan border was important for the success

²¹ Jon Boone, “US drone strikes could be classified as war crimes, says Amnesty International”, *The Guardian*, 22 October 2013, p. 7.

²² Mark Lander, “Pakistani premier meets Obama to mend ties”, *The New York Times*, 23 October, 2013, p. A1.

of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counter IED efforts, and they underscored the critical significance of effective border coordination mechanisms between Pakistan and Afghanistan”. There was also a reference to an Indian concern. “The two leaders emphasized that no country’s territory should be used to destabilize its neighbours. Further, the leaders noted that extremism and terrorism represent a common challenge for humanity and that solution lies in collaboration and joint efforts by the international community”.²³

Conclusion

By the reckoning of some experts, the Obama-Sharif dialogue was the third time since the terrorist attacks on the United States that Islamabad and Washington had tried to reset their relations. After a tense day when Richard Armitage delivered a rough ultimatum to Pakistan in his conversation with General Mahmood Ahmad, then the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence, who happened to be in Washington for a visit, President Pervez Musharraf had drawn very close to the Bush administration. The Pakistani leader had surprised the American leadership by quickly accepting all the conditions, not just distancing his country from the Taliban regime in Kabul, Afghanistan. Pakistan was handsomely rewarded in terms of both economic and military aid. On one of his visits to the American capital, President Musharraf was invited to visit and stay at the Camp David presidential retreat in the mountains of Maryland. This was a gesture reserved for only those visiting dignitaries that Americans considered to be exceptionally close to them.

After the ouster of President Musharraf, who resigned in 2008, the new Obama administration began an assiduous courtship of his successor, Asif Ali Zardari. However, the Americans were fully aware of the fact that Zardari did not hold all the cards in his hands and that some were still played by the head of the army – General Kayani. Washington’s efforts at courtship included the general as well. A senior official from the Obama administration had no hesitation in telling me that “Zardari was our man since he will do our bidding”. That had obviously happened. *The Washington Post* published a long story the day Sharif left for Pakistan, revealing how cooperative the Zardari administration was in helping Washington develop its drone programme. The peak of the drone programme was reached in 2010, midway through Zardari’s five year rule (2008-13), when 117 strikes were recorded. “Despite repeatedly denouncing the CIA’s drone campaign, top officials in Pakistan’s government have for years endorsed the program and routinely received briefings on classified casualty counts, according to top-secret CIA documents and Pakistani diplomatic memos”, wrote the newspaper. “The files describe dozens of drone attacks in Pakistan’s tribal region and include maps as well as before-and-after photos of targeted compounds over a four year stretch from late 2007 to late 2011 in which the campaign

²³ The United States Department of State, “Joint Statement by Obama, Pakistan’s Prime Minister”, 23 October 2013.

intensified dramatically. Markings on the documents indicate that many of them were prepared by the CIA's Counterterrorism Center specifically to be shared with Pakistan's government. They tout the success of strikes that killed dozens of alleged al-Qaeda operatives and assert repeatedly that no civilians were harmed".²⁴

It was clear that Washington was not entirely certain which way Sharif will take his country in defining its relations with the United States. Another senior official had confided to me that the political leadership in the United States would be reluctant to accept Nawaz Sharif as Pakistan's leader even if he won that position through a free and fair election. His strong Islamic leanings made the Americans uneasy about Sharif. These misgivings notwithstanding, Washington has begun to work with the new prime minister.

President Obama and his team had prepared themselves well for the Sharif visit. The Pakistani Prime Minister was given a warm welcome. On the last day of the Pakistani leader's visit, "Mr. Obama pointed to Mr. Sharif's election – the first successful completion of a full civilian-led political cycle in Pakistan's history – as a harbinger of change. And he offered American help with energy and public works projects to rebuild Pakistan's economy".²⁵ However, the real test of the new relationship will come in the next several months as the speed of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan picks up. Washington will watch Islamabad closely as it continues to withdraw its troops and heavy equipment from Afghanistan, using the Pakistani road network and the port of Karachi. They expect Pakistan to ensure that this passage does not become subject to terrorist attacks. The Obama administration will also want Pakistan to be more actively involved in getting the Taliban to agree to some kind of power-sharing agreement with Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai and his successor. If Sharif delivers on these expectations, Pakistan can hope to see some of the goodwill America had in the past for his country return to some extent – but only to some extent. Much has changed in Asia and also in America's own position in the fast-changing world for Pakistan-US relations to return to what they were in the past several decades.

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²⁴ Greg Miller, "Secret memos reveal explicit nature of U.S., Pakistan agreement on drones", *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2013, p. A1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*