

Dealing with Imran Khan

The new Pakistan PM has been making peace overtures but India must be cautious in its response



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Imran Khan was sworn in as Prime Minister on August 18, after winning a vote of confidence in Pakistan's National Assembly decisively against Nawaz Sharif's brother Shahbaz Sharif. There has been speculation in India about how to deal with a Pakistan Government headed by Imran Khan. It is futile to speculate how Imran will behave towards India. But, one should look at future developments, which will shape his reaction towards domestic and international challenges Pakistan faces.

Imran founded the Tehreek-e-Insaf Party (PTI) together with a former ISI Chief Lt General Hamid Gul. General Gul invited worldwide attention for his support for radical Islamic outfits in Pakistan, Afghanistan and even in Bosnia. Imran himself has supported the Afghan Taliban and other radical Islamic outfits in Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Insaf government in Peshawar has been very forthcoming in funding Maulana Samiul Haq, who is an electoral ally of the Party. Samiul Haq is better known as the "Father of the Taliban." He runs the Dar-ul-Uloom Seminary, which hosted the former Taliban (Haqqani Network) leader, Jalaluddin Haqqani.

It has also hosted the local Head of the Al Qaeda in the Indian sub-continent, Asim Umar, and Akhtar Mansoor who succeeded Mullah Omar as the Taliban Chief. The Seminary has a cosy relationship with

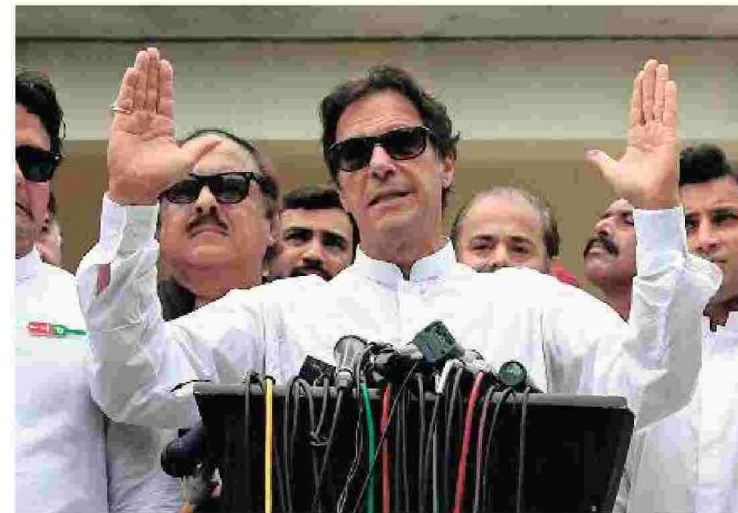
Maulana Masood Azhar, the Chief of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, who was responsible for several attacks on India, including the attack on India's Parliament on December 13, 2001.

Imran's connections with the Pakistani military are an open secret. He sought to destabilise the Nawaz Sharif government, staging a protest to close down the capital Islamabad, together with another ISI asset, the Canada-based cleric, Tahir ul Qadri, in November 2016. While Imran may ostensibly keep some distance from these radical outfits after assuming office, the contacts of his party with them will continue. He will inevitably back the army's favourite Jihadi outfit, the Lashkar-e-Taiba. These outfits operate against both India and Afghanistan, necessitating close cooperation with Afghanistan and the Trump Administration, especially in forums like the Financial Action Task Force.

Economic woes

Imran is going to immediately face two major challenges. These are Pakistan's continuously dwindling foreign exchange reserves, now valued at around a mere \$10 billion and the reality that IMF assistance may not be forthcoming, unless details of Pakistan's total repayment liabilities to China on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has been estimated at around \$90 billion, are furnished and examined.

US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has made it clear no money will be forthcoming from the IMF, if it is used to repay Pakistan's debts to China. Moreover, Chinese banks appear to be reluctant to pour money into a bottomless pit. The Saudis will keep a close eye on Imran's explicit desire to build bridges to Iran, though some Saudi banks have ex-



Tread with caution Pakistan must give assurance on stopping cross-border terrorism REUTERS

pressed their readiness to extend credits up to \$4 billion.

With the advent of winter, infiltration in the Kashmir valley will naturally fall. The real test will, however, come after the winter snows melt. There are enough Jihadi cheerleaders in Pakistan for Imran's PTI to keep up the anti-India tirade for Jihad against India and for Taliban rule in Afghanistan. There are three noted India baiters in Imran's Cabinet – Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureishi, "Human Rights" Minister Shireen Mazari and Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed. Imran's comments on India after the elections have generally been moderate. But, he will be given little space by the army to do or say anything that comes in the way of the army's "bleed India with a thousand cuts" approach, involving liberal use of Jihadi groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba.

India should not rush into uncharted waters by hurriedly engaging in any "Composite" or "Comprehensive Dialogue", wherein terrorism receives very little importance. We should make it clear

that the framework for a Dialogue already exists under the Foreign Ministerial level India-Pakistan Joint Commission set up in 1983, where all issues including Kashmir can be discussed at a high level. But, no serious dialogue can be held unless Pakistan fulfills the assurance that General Parvez Musharraf gave Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on January 4, 2004 that "territory under Pakistan's control" would not be used for terrorism against India. Dialogue with Pakistan was resumed only after verifying that Gen Musharraf was abiding by this assurance. A serious "Back Channel" discussion on Kashmir followed only after terrorism ended.

'Discrete' contacts

In the meantime, discrete official contacts with Pakistan can continue. More importantly, we should be prepared to upgrade the present conversations between the DGMOs, which discuss prevailing ground issues, to meetings at a higher level between India's Vice Chief/Army Commander and Pakistan's Chief of General Staff, who wields clout in the GHQ Rawalpindi.

These contacts can be used to discuss measures to end infiltration and craft CBMS to ensure peace and tranquility are maintained across the border and Line of Control. (Pakistan's DGMO is a relatively junior "Two Star" General.) We have such mechanisms with other neighbours like China and Myanmar. More importantly, like in Myanmar, the army plays the predominant role on security issues and the Army's Chief of General Staff wields far greater clout than its National Security Adviser on security issues, in Pakistan.

Imran Khan is keen on hosting the next SAARC Summit in Islamabad. There is little point in such a Summit before Pakistan fulfills its obligations on free trade with India under the SAARC Free Trade Agreement and provides transit facilities for trade between India and Afghanistan. Moreover, since there is no question of China, which is not a South Asian country, becoming a member of SAARC, there should be prior agreement that Pakistan will not raise the issue of China's membership at the Summit.

When the Indian Consulate General was being set up in Karachi, then External Affairs Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee decreed that visas for those wishing to visit India to meet friends and relatives should be liberally issued. This policy paid remarkable returns in ending the hostility of those brainwashed for three decades.

We need to make it clear to everybody concerned in Pakistan that our aim is to be unwavering in responding strongly to those who promote hate, terrorism, violence and enmity, while keeping doors open for those who abhor violence and seek understanding, to visit India.

The writer is a former High Commissioner to Pakistan