



US-Pakistan and Peace in Afghanistan

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The Paris Climate Change Summit gave the opportunity to the leadership of Afghanistan and Pakistan to meet and show their interest in re-initiating the peace dialogue between the Afghan and Taliban leadership, which got stalled after the news of the death of Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, surfaced. The stalled dialogue brought forth significant rise in violent Taliban attacks in Afghanistan, which had not only jeopardised the entire Afghan rehabilitation process, but perturbed the Western powers, which not only wanted to move their forces out of Afghanistan, but needed to have a stable South Asia, with rising instability in the West.

The leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan met in Paris on Monday, November 30, 2015 to discuss ways to resurrect peace talks with Taliban insurgents and to improve relations between the neighbours that soured earlier in the year after a string of militant attacks in Kabul.

An unofficial statement stated, "Both leaders agreed to work with all those who would enter such a process as legitimate political actors, and act, alongside the Afghan government, against those who refuse to take the path of peace." Sharif had briefed Ghani on its ongoing military crackdown on militants on its side of the border, saying that he

vowed, "Pakistan would take all efforts to tackle the menace of terrorism facing the two countries."¹

Though the meeting did not bring forth any overtly decisive outcome, but it certainly initiated the dialogue process between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is integral to have any dialogue take place between the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan leadership.

The role of Pakistan in pushing forward the peace process in Afghanistan between Taliban and the Afghan leadership remains undeniable. The Pakistani leadership, especially the military, has been playing an important role to bring the Taliban leadership to the dialogue table, as it has remained instrumental in assisting the Taliban, while they were in power in Afghanistan, and has maintained close contact during the latter's existence in exile.

However, with the vacuum that was created with the news of the death of Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and the problems of choosing the next leader till Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was finalised, the dialogue process got stalled. The US, along with China, wanted immediate resumption of dialogue, which got reflected in the frequent visits of Pakistan to the US as well as China in the last few months. However, unconfirmed reports state recently that Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour was injured or possibly killed in a fire-fight following a verbal dispute at a meeting of militant commanders in Pakistan outside Quetta in western Pakistan, exposing deep divisions within the fractious militant movement, bringing the entire process of dialogue at risk again.²

The major challenges that the future will unfurl is the mentality of the new Afghan Taliban leadership; their intentions of participating in the dialogue for achieving a peaceful agreement; the stability of decision making of the Pakistani leadership and how they will pursue a path of establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan; and the role of the regional

and international players in the region as well as in the extended neighbourhood, who remain integral to a durable peace process to be brought in Afghanistan.

The US and Pakistan

The recent trips of the Pakistani civilian leadership and military generals to United States gave rise to various assumptions regarding the purpose of such multiple visits within such a short span of time. The US has been trying hard to push Pakistan into bringing back life to a stalled peace process in Afghanistan, re-initiating a dialogue between all the parties, which would be mutually agreeable to all the parties in question. These visits also gave rise to serious speculations amongst US as well as Pakistani media and strategic analysts regarding the US trying to force Pakistan into a nuclear agreement to check its fast increasing small scale tactical nuclear warheads. However, as Pakistan values its nuclear weapons programme, providing a strategic advantage in the region, reducing their weapons capability naturally was not an option for Pakistan to vie for and, henceforth, there were no such deal that materialised.

Nawaz Sharif visited the US just after the ISI Director, Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar, completed his US visit.³ Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar, during his visit to Washington in mid October, held meetings with top US intelligence officials, discussing strategic issues and counter-terrorism.⁴ Sharif's visit suggested no signs of a scaled-down partnership. The joint statement issued after his meeting with Obama reiterated long-standing pledges of cooperation and announced a series of modest though diverse initiatives in areas ranging from clean energy to girl's education. Nawaz Sharif tried to maintain Pakistan's importance in the minds of the US policy makers, who have shown significant impatience with regard to Pakistan for refusing to crack down on terrorist outfits like that of the Haqqani network.⁵

Washington, inter alia, views its relationship with Islamabad through the lens of Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, the chief focus of the Obama-Sharif meeting was on Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan Taliban. Washington wants Pakistan to eliminate

the Taliban sanctuaries on its soil, which help fuel the insurgency in Afghanistan, and sever ties with the group. It also wants Pakistan to use its influence over the Taliban to convince it to come to the negotiating table and hash out a peace deal with Kabul to end the war.⁶

Immediately after Prime Minister Sharif came back from the US, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Raheel Sharif made a personal five-day visit to the US. The visit of COAS Sharif made it apparent that the Pakistani army still remains at the helm of decision making, especially in Pakistan's defence and foreign affairs. As per Hassan Askari Rizvi, "Given the current reality of power management in Pakistan, it is only natural that the Americans would want to talk to the military when it comes to discussing their chief concerns in this region... The Americans would like to talk about counter-terrorism, or Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, or issues related to the transfer of military hardware and security funds – these are all areas, which are controlled by the military."⁷

COAS Sharif, during the visit, met Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, officials of the Pentagon as well as various other US government officials. It should be noted here that the COAS travelled to Washington of his own volition and the DoD (Department of Defence) officials met him at his request.⁸ As per DG Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), Lt Gen. Asim Bajwa, the US Defence Secretary emphasised that the US values Pakistan and looks at its relations with the South Asian country independent of all other countries. Kerry also appreciated Pakistan's contribution and sacrifices in fighting the war on terror.⁹ Sharif met CIA Director John Brennan, discussing key issues like re-initiating the fragile Afghan peace process and security challenges facing the region.¹⁰ During the meetings between Sharif and officials from Pentagon, especially US CJCS General Dunford, US Chief of Army Staff, General Milley and Commander CentCom, General Austin, both sides exchanged their views on strengthening military-to-military relationship and pondered over the chances of increased mutual cooperation. They also agreed to exchange more information about targets and enhance coordination for regional security.¹¹ The issue of terrorist financing was also taken up for discussion between the two officials.

The outcome of the visit was extremely sober, without any ground breaking promises or defence deals. Some analysts suggested that as the growing Pakistani nuclear arsenal worried the US administrators, and Pakistan was adamant in going ahead with its nuclear weapons programme, developing the RA'AD long range cruise missile, capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as far as 350kms, as well as increasing its nuclear stockpile to 110-130 warheads, up from 90-110 in 2011,¹² the Nawaz visit turned out more to be a courtesy visit.¹³ Before the visit took place, Bruce Reidel, who authored the Obama administration's Af-Pak policy, stated "During these talks, President Obama will see Nawaz Sharif not as the problem but perhaps not also the solution".¹⁴

It should be mentioned here that as per the US Treasury National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment Report, 2015, the Haqqani Network generates funds by a wide range of sources including businesses and proceeds derived from criminal activities, such as smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom in Afghanistan and Pakistan... Lashkar-e-Taiba receives majority of its funds from within Pakistan, including by using its charitable front organisations, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD) and Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), to solicit donations. It has also been stated that LeT generates additional funds from private donations and commercial ventures. The report notes that the group's two largest financial hauls come from private donations during Ramazan and profits associated with the collection and sale of animal hides during the Eid-ul-Azha, each of which nets the group millions of dollars. The report also states that Faisal Shahzad, who tried to detonate an explosive device at New York's Times Square on May 1, 2010, received large sums of money from supporters of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹⁵

With chances of Pakistan being able to play a considerable role in re-initiating the peace process in Afghanistan as well as bring a check on such illegal financial transactions, the past visits of Pakistan civilian and military leadership can be assessed. It can be also mentioned here that much to the worry of the countries in South Asia, the US administrators have also re-initiated the plan to sell eight F-16 fighter bombers to Pakistan, which would assist the Pakistani decision makers to act with more diligence. The sale,

which would be possible only after being passed by the US Congress, would add to Pakistan's sizable force of fighter jets, which includes more than 70 F-16s and dozens of French and Chinese attack aircrafts.¹⁶ It should be noted here as well that earlier in April, the US State Department approved Pakistan's request for a billion dollars worth of military hardware and equipment.¹⁷ In May this year, the US handed over to Pakistan over 14 combat aircrafts, 59 military trainer jets and 374 armoured personnel carriers.¹⁸ The impact of the US becomes apparent on the Pakistani decision making mechanism, after the two visits of PM Sharif and COAS Sharif, when the Pakistani leadership started making fervent attempts to mend relations with Afghanistan, and later with India, bringing down the level of tension as well as the influence of other bigger actors in the region, who has invested heavily to carve out a bigger role gaining from the frictious and volatile relations between neighbours. Pakistan accepting to send political emissaries from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan to discuss their role in bringing about peace in Afghanistan after they were invited by Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani,¹⁹ creating the opportunity for both the Pakistani and Afghanistani leadership meeting each other on the sidelines of the Paris Climate conference²⁰, as well as going ahead with the India Pakistan NSA level talks in Bangkok, shows the change of attitude of the Pakistani leadership for the time being.

The sale of the F-16s could be blocked though, if the Congress decides that such military hardware will not help Pakistan in its counter terrorism operations, but would be used in positioning itself against India. The Congress and the US State Department are already in a standoff over an effort to sell used Navy cutter vessels to Pakistan earlier in 2015. In March, the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs put a hold on about \$150 million in foreign military financing. The Committee said that the cutters were not essential to fighting militants.²¹ This shows that US Congress as well as the US State Department is vetting and analysing closely all requests of arms and assistance made by the Pakistani leadership, only passing such bills till they are convince about their role in counter terrorist operations.

Pakistan and the New Strategic Challenges

With the fast changing international spectrum, having myriad strategic and economic threats looming in the horizon, Pakistan, with the insistence of the West as well as China, may have been forced to sober down its stand by not only meeting Afghan President Ghani, but also meeting Indian Prime Minister Modi in the same venue in Paris. The Pakistani and the Indian leadership also went ahead holding the NSA level dialogue in Bangkok, an event that was kept in the wraps from the media, till NSA Ajit Doval and Nasser Khan Janjua came out with a Joint Statement after the event, their discussions covering peace and security, terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir, and other issues.²² Prime Minister Sharif also attended the ground breaking ceremony in Ashgabat on December 13, 2015, Pakistan being a key player in the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan and India (TAPI) pipeline project²³, a project that is not only supported by US but also might be one major element in strengthening the peace process in the region. The Heart of Asia Summit also strengthened the commitment of the neighbouring countries of the region by placing Afghanistan at its centre and engaging its member states in sincere and result oriented cooperation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, alongside a secure and prosperous region.²⁴ Afghan President and Pakistan Army Chief discussed the roadmap and it was agreed to put in place specific measures to deny terrorists' access to financial and material resources, dismantle their sanctuaries and curtail their ability to recruit and train new terrorists. During the meeting two sides discussed "meaningful steps" that could bring enduring peace and ensure that the gains made in this regard are irreversible. Prime Minister Sharif described the enemies of Afghanistan as enemies of Pakistan, adding that his government would continue to support an Afghan-led reconciliation process, which seemed to be the most viable option to end violence in Afghanistan. The outcome of the conference was the unanimously adopted "Islamabad Declaration," reaffirming commitment of the Heart of Asia countries for long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. Towards this end, the declaration stipulated measures for deepening cooperation and collaboration in political, security, economic development and regional connectivity areas, within the Heart of Asia region. Recognising that emerging security challenges have the potential of expanding to the entire region, if

timely measures are not taken, the conference agreed on the need to evolve a collective approach to deal with such challenges. It also agreed to continue cooperation in the following Confidence Building Measures (CBMs): disaster management; counter-terrorism; counter-narcotics; trade, commercial and investment opportunities; regional infrastructure; and education.²⁵

The Summit also provided a platform to have bilateral meetings between the leaderships. The most important subject in these sideline meetings was to explore ways and means of improving Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and facilitating the resumption of stalled Afghan reconciliation process. Key elements of this consensus were: peace in Afghanistan is vital for the peace in the region and beyond; closer collaboration and coordination between Pakistan and Afghanistan is essential for promoting peace in Afghanistan and for effectively combating terrorism; and reconciliation through a politically negotiated settlement is the only viable option for promoting long-term peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's role and commitment for facilitating peace talks was recognised.

Pakistan and India also agreed to restart the dialogue process, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj disclosed at a joint press conference with Sartaj Aziz: "Instead of composite dialogues now comprehensive dialogues will be held in which all outstanding issues will be discussed". All eight sectors of the composite dialogue would be part of the comprehensive bilateral dialogue and more things could be added to it. Comprehensive dialogue will include discussions on peace and security, Jammu and Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, confidence building measures, the Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project, economic and commercial cooperation, counterterrorism, narcotics control and humanitarian issues.²⁶ It will also address people to people exchanges and religious tourism. Minister Swaraj confirmed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Pakistan next year for the SAARC summit expected to be held in coming September 2016.²⁷

It is certainly worth noting here, that there seems to have been a shift of attitude within the Pakistani leadership, than what it maintained till mid 2015 on making attempts

to mend relations. The US may have played a role in making such a change in stand and attitude. However, the Pakistani leadership, the civilian as well as the military, which presently seem to be working in tandem, will have to keep maintaining the present stand of working towards healing relations with its neighbours, making wholehearted attempts to keep a check on those actors who function with or without the support of the government, for spreading violence and instability in the region. Only then, such shift will have any significant effect on the relations with its neighbours in particular and on the region in general.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

Endnotes:

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