



# PIPS Conference Brief

## Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Exploring the Way Forward

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#### Summary

- This brief summarizes the findings of a national conference on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations with the purpose of exploring the way forward.
- The two countries suffer from trust deficit, making futile all attempts to rest the ties. Yet, the ties are of import and can be strengthened.
- Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) is a major development; to effectively take it forward, a proper implementation plan should be charted.
- As prospects of reconciliation with Taliban are explored, one of the new channels that is being explored is engaging Islamic scholars from both sides.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan's offer of granting citizenship to Afghan refugees can be explored by taking domestic considerations into account and finding a middle way out which treats with Afghans on humanitarian ground.
- The two countries can also cooperate on security issues against common threats such as ISIS.

#### Context

By August 2018, several changes in the administration of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States were seen to have impact on Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. One, a new government came to power in Pakistan; the first visit of its foreign minister was to Afghanistan. And two, the United States tasked one office with the purpose of exploring peace talks in Afghanistan. Held in this context, the seminar was conceptualized to contribute in providing a friendly atmosphere for moving forward Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

#### Speakers (arranged alphabetically by last name)

**Dr. Qibla Ayaz**

Chairman, Council of Islamic Ideology

**Amb. (R) Aziz Ahmed Khan**

Former Diplomat

**Abdullah Dayo**

Program Coordinator, FES

**Lt. Gen. (R) Mohammad Hamid Khan**

Security Expert

**Muhammad Amir Rana**

Director, PIPS

**Marvi Sirmed**

Human rights activist

**Rahimullah Yousafzai**

Journalist, Peshawar

**H.E. Dr. Omar Zakhilwal**

Ambassador of Afghanistan to Pakistan



### Key observations

- The conference noted the ***two countries suffer from deep mistrust of each other***, which comes to the front, despite all best efforts.

This mutual mistrust emanates from a sense of history where the two countries perceive the other holding hostile ambitions. In recent times, the threat from trans-national terrorism further undermined the relations, as both blame each other for hosting terrorists.

Because of this history, every fresh attempt to “reset” the ties is followed by another fresh attempt to do so. Hamid Karzai, as president of Afghanistan, made most of his foreign trips to Pakistan. When Ashraf Ghani took office, a sense of optimism prevailed, of breaking from the past. From Pakistan’s side too, the present government is the third civilian government to have assumed power, and made a note of changing the relations. To cut it short, as one said, there has been “no dearth of official visits” from both sides.

Yet, the relations often fall back on the same old line. It begs a question: why so? Instead of finding the tangible irritants, one hinted, the two need to earnestly follow what they say.

- Yet, participants noted, ***friendly ties between Islamabad and Kabul are vital*** not only for the two, but also for the region, in the old sense of exporting peace but also in light of enhancing connectivity in South Asia.

Moreover, amid all the despair, the two have progressed on some fronts, pushed by consistent efforts. For one, the conference noted, there has been substantial reduction in public blame game. This is largely due to the comprehensive bilateral action plan.

- 2018 saw the formulation and agreement on the comprehensive ***Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS)***, under which the two countries met on a host of issues with the intent of resolving them. A separate working group is formed for each of these five broader areas: politico-diplomatic, military, economic and trade, intelligence, and refugees issue.

The plan is now in implementation phase, and is seen as having the potential of normalizing the relations. But, taking cue from the past, it was suggested to develop and keep track of an implementation framework of APAPPS. Additionally, more women should be made members of the five working groups.

- The conference also debated the **prospect of reconciliation** with the Afghan Taliban. A speaker commended the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes Afghanistan, US, Pakistan, and China for at least designing some reconciliation framework.

The issue of bringing Taliban to the table also came up. While Pakistan was asked to take steps in this regard, it has also emerged that Pakistan has somewhat limited influence in this regards. Some other channels may be opted too.

- A new dimension in the relations has been **religious diplomacy**, as Islamic scholars from Afghanistan and Pakistan met to deliberate on Afghanistan conflict.

Three such meetings have taken place recently: The first conference was held in Jakarta, Indonesia where delegates from three countries Indonesia, Afghanistan and Pakistan met, and issued a joint statement. The second one was an international conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, resulting in the finalization of Mecca declaration. The third conference was held in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Prominent issues discussed in these deliberations were: whether or not the democratic system is Islamic, and whether or not the war in Afghanistan is justified on religious grounds. On the first, it was said that many Islamic scholars, who opposed British Empire, had participated in democratic process; deeming it un-Islamic would be illogical thus. On the second, it was said the sticking point was the presence of international troops, which are viewed as foreign forces, providing a *just war* rationale. Yet, it was noted, some common way was explored.

The real bone of contention in these deliberations was not much about what is right or wrong, but how to go about saying what is right or wrong: should a *fatwa* be issued? Or a joint statement? Which countries should be mentioned? Should groups be mentioned by name?

Pakistani scholars suggested that Afghanistan can follow Pakistan in issuing a document similar to *Paigham-e-Pakistan*, which reads more like a fatwa, ostracizing bloodshed inside the country. It was also discussed, especially during Jakarta Conference, that if Taliban are not able to lay down arms and come to negotiation in political process, they may continue with their armed wing but also constitutional political wing. This way, effort of the Taliban will be met through constitution and legal matter.

- The conference also touched upon the issue of Prime Minister Imran Khan's offer of **granting citizenship to Afghan refugees**. Reportedly, PM Khan had made the offer for Karachi-based Afghans.

The conference noted that return of Afghan refugees should ensure their dignity, safety, and security. The official policy of Pakistan has been "voluntary repatriation" of the Afghans. Same is also echoed by Afghanistan, which expects that until voluntary repatriation, the Afghans should be taken

care in host country, Pakistan. Yet, there has been debate when and how to send them back home.

It was shared that repatriation cannot succeed without serious commitment from both sides. Bilateral efforts are required, such as by proposing a joint framework. For example, Ministry of Refugees and Rehabilitation in Afghanistan can engage with the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) in Pakistan.

At the same time, domestic parties should also be taken on board, especially in Balochistan where the influx of Afghans is blamed for tilting the demographic balance against the Baloch. Baloch nationalist parties, including those allied with the central government, strongly resist the citizenship offer.

Some participants called for taking the middle way out. For one, at least the tag of illegal stay can be removed. This can include provision of, say, resident card, which enables its holder to utilize basic services without much hassle.

- The conference also called for some sort of **security cooperation** between the two countries. After all, both face the threat of militancy, and can practically take steps in not allowing their respective soils be used for terrorist purposes. This cooperation is greatly felt now against ISIS, a common threat which may become graver as Taliban are lured into dialogue.
- Similarly, the two countries should redress the movement of drugs along the border, besides controlling illegal movement. These can be achieved by better visa regime, compensations, among others.
- The conference noted that Pakistan-Afghanistan relations should be **treated bilaterally**. It was suggested that Pakistan should seek friendship with Afghans, rather than Pashtuns only.
- The conference also called for a range of **people-to-people relations** in the shape of medical tourism, Afghan refugees, cricket matches, scholarships, media exchange, Track-II dialogues, among others.