

# Afghanistan as Seen from Pakistan IV

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# Pakistan's peace talks with TTP: Prospective outcome and implications

Muhammad Amir Rana

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## 1. Background

The outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) agreed to an indefinite ceasefire with the government of Pakistan on May 29, 2022.<sup>1</sup> The announcement was not much of a surprise as the secret talk process had already been revealed by the media. However, the terms of the ceasefire caused an uproar in the country.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) took up the issue on the floors of the parliament, pushing the PML-N-led coalition government to convene a bigger session of the National Security Committee (NSC) on June 22, 2022.<sup>3</sup> The military assured the committee that no extra-constitutional deal was to be made with the proscribed TTP. A press statement issued after the NSC meeting mentioned that an in-camera parliament session would be summoned in which the prime minister will take the house on board.<sup>4</sup> The press statement implied that the issue of talks with the TTP had been resolved amicably with the political leadership.

The NSC has declared that all decisions pertaining to the proposed deal will be made with the approval of the Parliament as per the Constitution. However, it does not explain what framework will be used to bring the terrorists under the ambit of a Constitution they renounce. Just back in 2014, the TTP and its allies were declared the "enemy alien" under Protection of Pakistan Ordinance. The text of the Act on the website of the National Counter Terrorism Authority Pakistan describes the "enemy alien" as a person who fails to establish his citizenship in Pakistan and is

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<sup>1</sup> Shahabullah Yousafzai, Pakistan, "TTP agree to indefinite ceasefire as talks continue," *The Express Tribune*, May 30, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2359319/pakistan-ttp-agree-to-indefinite-ceasefire-as-talks-continue>

<sup>2</sup> Ismail Khan, Islamabad, "TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire," *Dawn*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-ttp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire>

<sup>3</sup> Javed Hussain, "Talks with TTP to be held under the framework of Constitution," *Dawn*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1696157/talks-with-ttp-to-be-held-under-the-framework-of-constitution-sanaullah>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

suspected to be involved in waging of war or insurrection against Pakistan or depredation on its territory, by virtue of involvement in offenses specified in the Schedule. The Schedule includes an extended inventory of offenses, mostly covered under Schedule 6 of ATA 1997, and further includes offenses committed outside Pakistan against national interests and cybercrimes to attack foreign interests in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

The TTP has committed all the offenses mentioned in the ordinance. Though the ordinance was introduced with a sunset clause, it reflects how the state institutions kept changing their approaches, and civilian leadership continued endorsing these policies without having a plain look at the drafts or giving a second thought. No one appeared willing to consider the losses the TTP has caused to the country.

According to figures derived from the Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on conflict and security, the TTP alone, while not including its breakaway factions and affiliated local groups, has carried out 3,280 terrorist attacks in Pakistan since its establishment in 2007 – including 301 suicide bombings – which have claimed 7,488 lives and wounded 15,086 others. In these attacks, the group has martyred 2,577 personnel of security and law enforcement agencies (530 FC men, 992 policemen, 117 personnel of unspecified paramilitaries, 815 army soldiers, 83 Levies and 40 Rangers officials), and 4,559 civilians, which also included 107 government officials, 554 political leaders and workers, 519 pro-government tribal elders, and 14 workers of CPEC-related projects. As many as 352 militants were also killed in these attacks who were either suicide bombers or were killed in retaliatory fire by security forces. Another about 1,200 personnel of security forces have also lost their lives since 2007 in operations against the TTP and affiliated groups. The figures make the picture more complex if sectarian and communal-related attacks

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "Soft on the TTP," *Dawn*, June 26, 2022.

made by the TTP and its former splinters such as Hizbul Ahrar and Jamaatul Ahrar are also counted.

The concerned citizenry was worried because of the TTP track record of destruction. The Pakistani Taliban have been given several chances in the past beginning with the Shakai accord in 2004, Sararogha accord in 2005, Waziristan accord in 2006, and the Nizam-e-Adl agreement in 2009, but no agreement lasted long. Experts also argue that even if the government signs a peace accord with the banned TTP, it will provide only a temporary or partial respite to the security institutions without offering a guarantee for a long-lasting peace.<sup>6</sup> Even before the launch of the military operation in North Waziristan in 2014, the government had been advocating for talks with the TTP. After some lethal attacks by the terrorists against law enforcement agencies, political leaders, polio vaccination teams, media persons, Shia pilgrims, and foreign tourists, etc., then prime minister of Pakistan, Mina Nawaz Sharif had held a high-level meeting on January 23, 2014,<sup>7</sup> and issued a statement that hinted at the use of force against the militants. However, in his address to the National Assembly on January 29, he said the government wanted to give peace another chance. However, nor the appeasement and nor the warnings worked, and finally the state decided to launch the military operation against the terrorists.<sup>8</sup>

Experts believe that the state institutions have been caught again in the delusion that peace with the terrorists is possible,<sup>9</sup> even though the TTP has not honored its words in the past. For the security institutions, which

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<sup>6</sup> Lt. General (Retd) Tariq Khan, former Corps Commander and IG Frontier Corps commented during a consultation on Afghanistan. The event was organized by the Pak Institute for Pakistan (PIPS) on June 9, 2002, in Islamabad.

<sup>7</sup> "PM Sharif announces another push for Taliban peace talks," *Dawn*, January 29, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1083531>

<sup>8</sup> The operation was launched on 15 June 2014 in North Waziristan along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border against the TTP.

<sup>9</sup> Tahir Khan, a journalist covering militancy and Afghan affairs, commented during a consultation on Afghanistan held on June 9, 2022 in Islamabad.

have been fighting the terrorist group for the last one and a half-decade, making peace with the TTP may be linked to securing the border and accelerating the mainstreaming of ex-FATA. But any deal with the outfit will negatively impact not only the tribal districts but also the larger socio-religious landscape in the country. In short, it risks undoing the gains against extremism during the last few years.

Against this backdrop, there is a need to assess the impact of the peace talks between the state and TTP. Analyzing potential scenarios of success and failure can help gauge the threat posed by the TTP. However, first it is also important to note the factors compelling the state to negotiate with the terrorists and what the state wants to achieve out of the proposed deal? The analysis is confined to studying the dynamics of the talks between the state and TTP. However, these themes are directly linked with the Taliban regime in Kabul as Kabul is facilitating the process. Kabul's intentions and motives are also important to examine as this factor is crucial for making or breaking the peace with the TTP.

## 2. Why the talks?

Eliminating terrorist networks and disconnecting them from their support bases have been the biggest counter-terrorism achievement for Pakistan in the last two decades. Support and sympathy for the TTP existed in the mainstream media, madrassas, religious groups, and policymaking circles. In this context, talking with the TTP is not a popular idea among most experts, politicians, civil society activists, law enforcement practitioners, and military commanders who fought against the group. Many among them assert that the state must not negotiate anything less than the surrender of the terrorists. Security institutions believe that the group is already defeated. Talking with a defeated force on their terms would mean a general amnesty to the terrorists and giving them back the space they



have already lost.<sup>10</sup> However, few experts who favor the peace talks with TTP argue that the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban have never been different entities, and that talking to the TTP is an attempt at securing Pakistan's geopolitical interests by appeasing the Taliban regime in Kabul and making them more friendly towards Pakistan.<sup>11</sup>

### *Geopolitical context*

Pakistan is providing maximum support to the Taliban regime for its geoeconomic and strategic interests. There are legitimate reasons why Pakistan prefers a friendly regime in Kabul but pardoning the Taliban's Pakistani supporters i.e., the TTP, is not without perils. It is also concerning that there is a prevailing perception amongst the intelligentsia that Pakistani state institutions are not very prolific in new ideas and that they have most probably relied on their conventional wisdom to navigate through the proposed deal with the TTP. The whole process has been secretive till just recently. An inclusive policymaking process led by the Parliament would have helped widen policy options but bridging the trust deficit among institutions is another big challenge.<sup>12</sup>

Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime is no secret as its objectives have been mentioned implicitly and explicitly through official and unofficial statements by policymakers on various occasions. Keeping India at the margins in Afghanistan is often described as one of the major objectives of Pakistan's Afghan policy while deepening the geoeconomics relationship with the Central Asian States in partnership with China is another objective. Pakistan also wants to keep its position as a major interlocutor of Afghanistan and to posture that the Taliban regime is still under its

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<sup>10</sup> "Pakistan needs to talk with TTP from 'position of strength': Speakers," *The Nation*, June 12, 2022, <https://nation.com.pk/2022/06/12/pakistan-needs-to-talk-with-ttp-from-position-of-strength-speakers/>

<sup>11</sup> Saleem Safi, Geo TV, June 25, 2022, <https://urdu.geo.tv/latest/289723->

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "The cost of peace talks," *Dawn*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1694378/the-cost-of-peace-talks>

influence. The US and Western countries are supportive that Pakistan is still a better channel to engage Afghanistan. Pakistan sees it as a strength to engage with the US and the West which could also help keep its relationship with China in equilibrium and India at bay from taking any aggressive political posture against the country.

Pakistan's expectations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan seem very high. The Taliban's view is diverse, and their leadership has different views about Pakistan and its policies, but their regime is struggling for international recognition and suffering an economic and humanitarian crisis and has not openly revealed their approach towards Pakistan. Taliban's all-powerful Defence Minister Mullah Yaqub, son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, has expressed sentiments which hurt the security establishment in Pakistan, and he has shown willingness to send Afghan army personnel to India for military training.<sup>13</sup> When Pakistan had conducted a series of airstrikes inside Afghanistan to target the TTP leadership, Mullah Yaqub had warned that the Taliban would not tolerate such invasions in the future.<sup>14</sup>

India and the Taliban have already restored their diplomatic connections which may be a cause of anxiety for Islamabad. Within the Taliban leadership, the Haqqanis who controlled Kabul are considered close to both Pakistan and the TTP. Therefore, many observers believe any agreement with the TTP will ultimately strengthen Haqqanis in the turf war within the Taliban ranks. If this is the case, it is not clear how the Haqqanis can protect the interests of Pakistan. A recent statement by the Afghan interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani validates that argument in which he not only acknowledged the sacrifices made by the TTP for the Afghan

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<sup>13</sup> *The Express Tribune*, June 4, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2360038/no-issues-in-sending-army-personnel-to-india-for-training-taliban>

<sup>14</sup> South Asia Monitor, "We won't tolerate 'invasions', says Taliban defense minister to Pakistan; Kabul-Islamabad ties taut," April 25, 2022, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/afghanistan/we-wont-tolerate-invasions-says-taliban-defense-minister-pakistan-kabul-islamabad-ties>

Taliban but also insisted that they would not pressure the TTP in the ongoing talks between the group and the Pakistani government. He categorically said that any solution should have been based on mutual understanding and the principle of give and take.

### *Giving space to Afghan regime*

Even though there are several power centers within the Taliban regime and many shura members do not hold a positive view of Pakistan, Pakistan has limited choice in Afghanistan. Supporting the Taliban regime is based on the premise that this regime is still better than the previous ones, and that it would not go openly against Pakistan. The Taliban regime cannot ignore Pakistan despite all their bitterness, and Pakistan is among the few nations that can help meet their economic and diplomatic challenges.<sup>15</sup> The ongoing talks with the TTP offer a colossal opportunity to the Afghan Taliban regime in Kabul to prove its willingness and ability to contain foreign militants in Afghanistan. The world is skeptical about the Taliban's pledges. Nevertheless, if the Taliban can help Pakistan neutralize the TTP, it might pave the way for the recognition of their government by at least a few of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours. By fulfilling their commitments regarding regional militant groups, the Taliban can also win the trust of China, Russia, and the Central Asian states. This is a compulsion that the Taliban's acting PM Mullah Akhund himself helping with peace talks and wants the talks to continue without any cut-off date<sup>16</sup>.

However, this will not be easy. Apart from ideological affinity, the Taliban have a past of coexistence and shared armed resistance in Afghanistan with many of these religiously inspired militant groups. Some reports suggest that many Taliban leaders do not endorse the negotiations

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<sup>15</sup> Naveed Hussain, "TTP Talks," *The Express Tribune*, June 12, 2002, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2361085/ttp-talks-lasting-peace-may-still-be-a-longshot>

<sup>16</sup> Ismail Khan, "Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire," *Dawn*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-ttp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire>

between Pakistan and the TTP as they believe that the Pakistani militants are not a separate entity from them. It is also uncertain how the Afghan Taliban, or the Haqqanis, will react and behave with the TTP if Pakistan-TTP negotiations collapse.

### *To counter hostile agencies*

A primary objective of the peace talks usually described in the security circles is curtailing the TTP's ties with the intelligence agencies of hostile countries. Pakistan's security institutions are giving the impression that the state is negotiating with the TTP from a position of strength as the group is currently deprived of resources and foreign support in Afghanistan. Some media reports have claimed that the security establishment fears Pakistan could lose its influence over the Afghan Taliban once other players including India start entering the equation. If there is such a fear, one should ask what Pakistan has achieved by investing huge resources in Afghanistan and supporting the Taliban at the cost of internal security.

Another objective, as reported in the media, is that Pakistan should not allow the TTP militants to have access to the weapons left behind by the Americans in Afghanistan; but that does not provide any substantial justification for negotiations with the terrorists. Understandably, states employ both political and military approaches to counter insurgents. However, the TTP has lost the ability to convert its militant movement into a large-scale insurgency in the merged tribal districts of ex-Fata. The TTP can achieve that goal only with Afghan Taliban support.<sup>17</sup>

### *Creating divide*

The ceasefire announced by the TTP has resulted in a decline in the terrorist attacks. The TTP has not claimed responsibility for any terrorist attack since May 9th, but the Gul Bahadar group has intensified terrorist

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

attacks against the security forces during the ceasefire times. The group was believed to be involved in six terrorist attacks since the announcement of the ceasefire which clearly indicates the displeasure of the Gul Bahadar group with the peace talks. The group believes that the state must negotiate with them, as they have more presence on the ground in Waziristan and believe they can counter TTP if allowed.<sup>18</sup> This development has taken as an indication by many experts that the peace talks will create divide among the ranks and files of the TTP. Even if the talks succeed, the hardliners may not accept it and join more radical groups like Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K).

#### *A remedy to counter sub-nationalist groups and IS-K*

It is also believed that the TTP will weaken the sub-nationalist forces in the tribal districts and also minimize the risk of an anti-Afghan Taliban movement in Pakistan. So far, there is no sign that the tribal districts could become the base for an anti-Taliban movement, but the return of TTP militants will increase tensions in the bordering region.<sup>19</sup>

Negotiating with the TTP is not new and has been in the air for the last several years. In a presser in January 2019, military officials said that the state was working on some mechanism to sort out the TTP and affiliated militant movements. At that time, it was argued that TTP militants could join the Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K) group if there was no engagement plan for the abandoned militants. However, only a few individuals and small splinter groups from the TTP had joined IS-K.<sup>20</sup> The reason was that IS was very exclusive in its nature, and the TTP was closely associated with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Had an amnesty been granted to the TTP on such

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<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "The cost of peace talks," *Dawn*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1694378/the-cost-of-peace-talks>

<sup>19</sup> Mohsin Dawar commented during a consultation on Afghanistan in Islamabad.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "The cost of peace talks," *Dawn*, June 12, 2022.

assumptions what sort of security situation Pakistan would have been facing right now?

The TTP is not only a major actor of violence in Pakistan, it is also a facilitator of the regional operations of Al Qaeda and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Al Qaeda has maintained its ties with the Afghan Taliban and has reportedly also helped the TTP recover and regroup in recent years; some Al Qaeda-aligned Pakistani groups even joined the TTP. In April 2021, CNN claimed, based on its interviews with two Al Qaeda operatives, that the group would step up its operations in the region after the US exit from Afghanistan. The report claimed that the group was planning a comeback by relying on its partnership with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.<sup>21</sup>

Any probable operational alliance between the TTP and Al Qaeda or with ETIM against Chinese interests in Pakistan can prove lethal and cause a diplomatic crisis.

### 3. Demands and options

A major uncompromising demand of the TTP is the reversal of the FATA merger. A TTP statement categorically said that the group would not accept any compromise on the pre-merger, 'independent' status of ex-FATA. The statement said, "if the Pakistan government and its security agencies want peace, they would have to restore its previous status."<sup>22</sup>

The TTP's other demands including enforcing Shariah regulation in Malakand and its extension in tribal districts are apparently acceptable for the Pakistani state. Though the Shariah Nizam-i-Adl Regulation, 2009, is

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<sup>21</sup> Nic Robertson, "Al Qaeda promises 'war on all fronts' against America as Biden pulls out of Afghanistan," CNN, April 30, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/30/asia/al-qaeda-afghanistan-biden-intl-cmd/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> Zulafqar Ali, "Jirga leaves for talks with TTP," *Dawn*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692709>

still operational in the Malakand division, the negotiators' apparent proclivity to accept the demand reflects that the existence of parallel administrative structures does not bother them much. The state institutions engaged in talks are seemingly also not concerned about the legal, political, and social consequences of accepting the TTP demands, which could later trigger more complex conflicts. The recent efforts of taking the political leadership on board seems an attempt to equally share the burden if the negotiation with the TTP collapsed.<sup>23</sup>

The government has categorically declared that it will not reverse the FATA merger as it would mean a return to the Frontier Crimes Regulation which was a relic of the British Empire and did not contain anything that could be considered 'Islamic'. The motive behind the demand is that the TTP wants Pakistani troops back from the tribal districts. However, the state is giving several concessions to the TTP including releasing their prisoners. Under such confidence-building measures, presidential pardon to two key militant commanders including TTP Swat spokesman Muslim Khan was on the cards.<sup>24</sup>

Another crucial demand from the government side is the disbandment of the TTP as an armed militant group.<sup>25</sup> The suggestions have been discussed that the TTP can change its names, and the TTP is insisting that it would not change its identity. Even if the TTP agreed to change the name of its organization, would it change the fundamental characteristics of the terrorist group? Many experts show this significant apprehension, apart from the others discussed before.

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<sup>23</sup> Javed Hussain, "Talks with TTP to be held under the framework of Constitution," *Dawn*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1696157/talks-with-ttp-to-be-held-under-the-framework-of-constitution-sanallah>

<sup>24</sup> Ismail Khan, "Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire," *Dawn*, May 31, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

## 4. Legitimacy of the process

The security institutions have also engaged the tribal jirgas to give legitimacy to the peace process with the terrorists. One tribal jirga, or committee as the TTP called it in its media statement, comprised 32 Mehsud tribesmen, and the other jirga comprised 16 tribesmen representing different tribes from Malakand. Both jirgas met with the TTP on May 13 and 14 in Afghanistan. Later, media reported that a 57-member jirga comprising sitting and former parliamentarians and elders from the erstwhile tribal region had left for Afghanistan's capital Kabul on June 1 for talks with the banned TTP. The KP government is represented in the jirga by Special Assistant to the Chief Minister on Information Barrister Mohammad Ali Saif. Many tribal leaders believe that these Jirgas have no mandate of the public and the jirga institution has been politized in the talks process. The citizen of the tribal districts has no major hopes from these jirgas.<sup>26</sup>

The talks are still stuck on the core demands of reversing the FATA merger, renaming the TTP, and withdrawing the Pakistani forces from tribal districts. The state of Pakistan has achieved so far is the TTP's pledge to continue the ceasefire and talks without any cut-off date. This was the major reason for bringing the issue to public debate, mainly in the parliament.<sup>27</sup>

## 5. Implications

The security institutions in Pakistan tend to confuse amnesty and reconciliation with deradicalization. While there is no opposition to deradicalization of former militants who renounce violence and no longer

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<sup>26</sup> Mohsin Darwar, Member National Assembly, commented during a consultation on Afghanistan held on June 9, 2002, in Islamabad.

<sup>27</sup> Javed Hussain, "Talks with TTP to be held under the framework of Constitution, *Dawn*, June 22, 2022.



commit any heinous crime, offering amnesty to or entertaining the demands of hardcore militants who refuse to abandon their extremist ideologies could prove dangerous. Using such concessions, the TTP could relocate to the areas it had once lost, with or without weapons, where its cadres would indeed propagate the group's ideology. A little public support and empowerment would be enough for the group to reassert the implementation of its version of Sharia. Secondly, as a 'reconciled TTP' in Pakistan's tribal areas, the Afghan Taliban would have vocal support inside Pakistan which would always look towards Kabul.

This is a delicate situation. If the rising sub-nationalist tendency in tribal districts is brought into the picture, the case will become more complex which, of course, cannot be handled alone by jirgas without legitimacy and mandate as well as the support of the security institutions. The issue must be brought into mainstream discussion in media, parliament, and other policy forums. A recently released annual report of the UNSC-led 1988 Taliban sanctions committee monitoring team said the banned TTP had up to 4,000 fighters based in east and south-east areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and made up the largest group of foreign fighters based there. The number of TTP members will increase if it wins a deal with Pakistan.

The assumption that peace with the TTP will bring stability to the tribal region and help manage the borders with Afghanistan is also largely contested. For one, many disgruntled members and factions within the TTP could splinter to either form one or more new groups or join the Islamic State's Khorasan chapter (IS-K), which has already intensified its terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.

After the reports came out about the peace talks with the TTP, except few weak voices of the victims of the APS Peshawar terrorist attack and the political parties which suffered the most due to terrorist violence such as the PPP and Awami National Party (ANP), no major reaction was seen in

the country from political parties or civil society organizations. The reaction by the ANP and PPP is understandable as the TTP claimed the responsibility for assassinating their top leadership including Benazir Bhutto Shaheed. However, these two parties have also not mobilized the masses on the issue. Other major parties in the current government will be less concerned about the talks because: the JUI-F always supported the idea of talks with TTP because of ideological affinity; the PML-N is focusing more on preserving its political capital and economy of the country. One cannot overlook PM Shabazz's statement when he was CM and requested the TTP not to attack Punjab.

The compulsions and shortcomings of the political parties notwithstanding, more surprising has been the lack of response from the masses and civil society. It can be an excuse that the economic crisis had such an impact that people are unable to think about anything else, but even the victims of terrorism have not come out to register their protests. This is a much deeper issue related to the mindset of the state institutions and the society which is still confused about the ideology of the terrorists and chooses to remain silent.

Once, not too long ago, a common citizen was not ready to accept that the Taliban or other religiously inspired militant groups could be involved in any act of terrorism inside Pakistan. Their actions outside the country were depicted as acts of jihad. These militant groups had a history of serving the state and its institutions and were labelled as saviours, patriots, mujahid, jihadis, and Taliban before they were declared terrorists.

Just over the recent years, the Pakistani society had started internalizing the idea that armed outfits like TTP, Al-Qaeda, IS-K, and LeJ were enemies of the people and state. The proposed talks with the TTP would ditch that very idea. This sudden turnaround by the state would create widespread confusion about militancy in society. A common citizen has been disillusioned by this move.

## 6. Policy options

As discussed above, the TTP would continue to pose threats to Pakistan's internal security and western borders. The talks would either succeed or collapse. In the latter case, Pakistan's relations with the Taliban regime would become chaotic. The Taliban regime cannot afford tension with Pakistan at a critical time when it is struggling for international recognition and legitimacy. Likewise, Pakistan cannot bear the failure of its Afghan strategy in which it has invested immense time and political capital.

Some experts suggest that Pakistan can go for cross-border surgical strikes as it had done in the recent past and can include covert decapitation attempts and armed drones to wean away malleable hardline leaders.<sup>28</sup> However, these are only tactical options. Pakistan will have to engage Kabul to neutralize the TTP directly. Talking with the outlawed group will not favor the Taliban regime either as it will not help to boost their image as a peacebuilder; rather, their regime will continue to be considered supportive of the terrorists and manipulators.

Whether Kabul absorbs the TTP within their ranks and files or expel it, Pakistan should allow Kabul to make its own choice. Pakistan should have broadly focused on encouraging and facilitating the Taliban to fulfill its commitments, which they made after Kabul's takeover. Pakistan must intensify its efforts further for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan which can reduce the bitterness of angry Taliban leaders. This trust deficiency is a major issue between Pakistan and the Taliban<sup>29</sup>. For that purpose, Pakistan must have a uniform approach toward all the Taliban groups and factions.

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<sup>28</sup> Naveed Hussain, "TTP talks," *The Express Tribune*, June 12, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> Tahir Khan, a senior journalist, said in a consultation on Afghanistan held on June 9, 2022, in Islamabad.

## Annex-1: Major Peace Agreements between Government and Other Actors

### Agreement 1

Date: June 27, 2002
Area: South Waziristan
Parties: Pakistan Army and local tribes
Terms: It was agreed that the house and other property of any person found harboring a foreigner would be destroyed.

### Agreement 2

Name: Shakai Agreement
Date: March 27, 2004
Area: Shakai, South Waziristan
Parties: Militants led by Nek Muhammad and Pakistan government
Guarantors: Tribal elders
Terms: It was agreed that the security forces would leave the area immediately after the announcement of the agreement. The government would pay compensation for deaths and loss of property suffered by the tribes during the security forces operation. The government would release all innocent people arrested during the operation and would minimize its interference in the tribal areas. The government would give a one-month deadline to foreign elements to voluntarily surrender to the government or announce to start leading a life in accordance with the law after registration with the authorities. The tribes would vouch for their peaceful conduct. The Peshawar Corps Commander would visit Wana along with the FATA secretary and the ISI director as a goodwill gesture to local tribes. The tribesmen would not conduct any violent activity in Pakistan, nor allow the use of their area against any other country.

### Agreement 3

Date: February, 2005
Area: South Waziristan
Parties: Government and Baitullah Mehsud

Points of dispute: The government tried to get an assurance that foreign militants would not attack Pakistani troops and would live peacefully in the area after registration even under fake names. The government offered that it would not hand them over to any other country. The militants were required to surrender their weapons. The foreign militants were to register with the authorities but the negotiations came to an abrupt halt before an agreement could be reached.

Maulana Merajuddin and Maulana Abdul Malik, pro-MMA tribal parliamentarians from South Waziristan, mediated the agreement.

### Agreement 4

Date: October 04, 2004
Area: South Waziristan
Parties: Government and Ahmedzai Wazir militants
Terms: Tribal militants demanded that if economic sanction imposed on Waziristan were lifted and all detained tribesmen released, they would guarantee not to attack Pakistanis forces in the future. The Ahmedzai Wazirs agreed to cooperate in tracking down the militants. The government ended the check post from Angoor Adda, a border area near Wana. The situation suddenly changed when the militants resumed attacks on army camps and accused the army of violating the agreement by repositioning its troops.

### Agreement 5

Date: November 2004
Area: South Waziristan
Parties: Government and Ahmedzai tribes
Terms: The Ahmedzais committed to hand over six wanted militants to the government. The tribesmen agreed not to attack government installations and forces, and not to use Pakistani territory to attack any foreign force. The government vowed to stop attacks on international forces in Afghanistan from the tribal area.

### Agreement 6

Date: February 22, 2005
Name: Sararoga Agreement
Area: North Waziristan
Parties: Government and Mehsud tribe

Terms: Baitullah Mehsud agreed that he would not cooperate with foreign militants and would help the Pakistani forces apprehend tribal militants.

### Agreement 7

Date: September 5, 2006
Area: Miranshah, North Waziristan Agency
Parties: Government and local Taliban commanders
Terms: Before entering into an agreement the agreement, the government agreed to virtually all the demands by the militants. Detained militants were released, their weapons returned, tribal privileges restored, 12 check posts abolished and troops stationed there recalled. The militants said that the <i>jirga</i> had assured them that the government would pay them Rs 10 million if it failed to return their weapons and vehicles, seized during various military operations.
Guarantors: Maulvi Nek Zaman, a parliamentarian from the tribal area, and tribal elders.

### Agreement 8

Date: February 17, 2008
Area: Miranshah, North Waziristan Agency
Parties: Government and Dawar and Wazir sub-tribes of Utmanzai tribe
Terms: This accord was meant to revive the September 5, 2006 peace agreement. The terms of that agreement were extended to the whole of North Waziristan, including Miranshah and Mirali.

### Agreement 9

Date: May 9, 2008
Area: Swat
Parties: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government and militants led by Mullah Fazlullah
Terms: Both sides agreed to stop violence and armed action in the Swat valley. The militants agreed to stop attacks on security personnel and government installations, while the government agreed to stop search operation and arrests. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government had signed an earlier agreement on the same terms with the defunct Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-Muhammadi on April 21, 2007.

### Agreement 10

Date: February 8, 2008
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Area: South Waziristan
Parties: Security forces and Baitullah Mehsud-led militants
Terms and outcome: The agreement was aimed at consolidating the unofficial ceasefire in place since February 05, 2008 with the release of around a dozen detained tribesmen. The fragile truce between security forces and Baitullah Mehsud collapsed in May 2008 after security forces came under attack in South Waziristan.

### Agreement 11

Date: February 23, 2009
Area: Bajaur Agency
Parties: Government and Taliban militants
Terms: The government promised to compensate the militants and tribesmen for the loss of life and property during the military operation. All government employees sacked during the operation on charges of having links with the Taliban were reinstated. The Taliban also agreed to quit their previous stance on pullout of the army from Bajaur. They agreed not to create any hindrance in the movement and deployment of troops in Bajaur.
Negotiators: Bajaur Agency Political Agent Shafeerullah Khan and Malakand Commissioner Syed Muhammad Javed represented the government, while militant commander Faqir Muhammad and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan spokesperson Maulvi Omar represented the militants. Local businessmen Haji Sarzamin Khan, Haji Muhammad and a tribal elder Saz Muhammad acted as mediators.

### Agreement 12

Date: March 11, 2009
Area: Bajaur Agency
Parties: Political administrators and Khar, Salarzai, Utmanzai tribes of Bajaur Agency
Terms: All the militant organizations would stand abolished and all their members would surrender to the tribes and the government. The Taliban would lay down their weapons and would be registered in their respective tribes and the elders would furnish a surety bond for their good behavior. Parallel courts would not be set up nor the government's writ challenged in any other manner. Foreign elements including Afghan nationals would not be provided shelter, shops or houses would not be rented to them. Government officials and security forces personnel would not be targeted or abducted; government installations, including buildings of schools, collages, hospitals and check posts would not be attacked. The security forces would have the freedom to move freely in the agency and if attacked would be entitled to retaliate. Terrorists

would not be allowed to use the area for sabotage activities. The tribesmen would be bound to restrict cross-border movement, infiltration in or interference with the affairs of other countries. The government would carry out development work in the area after restoration of peace.

### Agreement 13

Date: February 16, 2009

Area: Swat / Malakand Division

Parties: Government and TNSM chief Sufi Muhammad

Terms: It was agreed that government would not launch a military operation in the area and *Shariah* would be implemented in Malakand. The TNSM agreed not to conduct any activity against the military or the government.



## Afghanistan's persisting outlook on Pakistan: Lessons for Islamabad's Afghan policy

Zia Ur Rehman

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## 1. Introduction and background

Pakistan has a unique relationship with Afghanistan. The two countries share a 2,570 km long border, also called Durand Line, and have numerous cultural, ethnic and religious connections. The former Afghan leader Hamid Karzai once described the two countries as “joined together like twins” and “inseparable.”<sup>30</sup> Yet relations between the two countries have never been smooth. Rather, they have been painful.

During the previous governments in Afghanistan, led by presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani respectively, anti-Pakistan slogans regularly echoed on the streets of Kabul and other parts of the country, with Islamabad accused of fomenting violence and instability in the country by supporting, harbouring, and facilitating the Afghan Taliban. The Ghani government was also consistent in blaming Pakistan for trying to bring instability and unrest in Afghanistan.

Even after the Afghan Taliban captured Kabul on August 15, 2021, in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal, and announced their interim government in the following weeks, anti-Pakistan sentiments still prevail among most of the Afghans. In fact, opinion about Islamabad within the ranks of the ruling Taliban has also rapidly changed.

Pakistan is now hosting around 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees, but there are an estimated 1.5 million more Afghans in the country without legal status, including over 250,000 who the government says have arrived since the Taliban’s August 2021 takeover.<sup>31</sup> Pakistan also emerged as the “biggest base” for urgent evacuation of foreigners and Afghan nationals from Afghanistan, after the Taliban captured most of the country. Despite Pakistan’s continued support to Afghanistan, it remains deeply unpopular

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<sup>30</sup> Amin Tarzai. "Afghanistan/Pakistan: 'Inseparable twins' in need of separation," RFERL, February 23, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1066082.html>

<sup>31</sup> Statement of UNHCR Pakistan spokesperson, June 20, 2022.

among the Afghan people as many among them see it as a root cause of their misery.

The tense history between the two countries is marked with five key factors: security interests, sovereignty concerns, geopolitical dynamics, cross-border ties, and connectivity and trade.<sup>32</sup> Both have accused each other of harbouring the other's opponents and interfering in their internal security affairs. Afghan government, civil society and media blame Islamabad for funding and hosting the Afghan Taliban on its territory to target Afghanistan. Similarly, Islamabad blames Afghan government in Kabul to provide sanctuaries to anti-Pakistan militant groups - including Islamist groups, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and Baloch separatist groups - which, they allege, carry out cross-border attacks and terrorist activities in Pakistan.

"Hosting and supporting each other's militant groups is the key reason behind the worsening of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan," said Basir Ahmed Hotak, a political analyst in Kabul.

"Whenever there was a bombing or suicide attack in Afghanistan, the government, media and politicians blamed Pakistan for it. This is how Afghanistan's society, in general, have become increasingly critical of Pakistan. They blame Islamabad for the turmoil in their country," Hotak shared with this researcher in an interview.<sup>33</sup> According to him, compared to Afghans living in rural areas, the population living in major urban centres, such as Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar Sharif and Herat, are more likely to have a negative view of Pakistan.

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<sup>32</sup> Grace Easterly and Elizabeth Threlkeld, "Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties and Future Stability in Afghanistan," USIP, August 12, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/08/afghanistan-pakistan-ties-and-future-stability-afghanistan>

<sup>33</sup> Telephonic conversation with Basir Ahmed Hotak, an Afghan political analyst currently based in Paris. June 22, 2022.

Pakistan has been involved in Afghanistan's internal affairs since the late 1970s when the Soviet Union sent thousands of troops into Afghanistan and immediately assumed complete military and political control of Kabul. Since then, Pakistan has provided political and military support for different factions within Afghanistan. During the 1980s, Pakistan was a major backer of the Afghan mujahideen (holy warriors) fighting against the Soviet invasion and hosted millions of Afghan refugees fleeing the war.

Even after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, Pakistan's government continued providing for training and financial assistance to a select group of mujahideen, popularly known as 'Peshawar Seven' - an alliance of Sunni mujahideen groups, including those led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Burhanudin Rabbani, Ahmed Shah Masood etc. It is important here to note that Pakistan was not the only country that intervened in Afghan affairs during that time. Iran formed a similar "Tehran Eight" group which was composed of mostly Shia and Hazara groups. Eventually, in the early 1990s, as Pakistan started supporting the Afghan Taliban who captured most of the country, other armed militant groups became estranged from Pakistan.

"Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan for the past four decades is the key reason that all major segments of Afghan society, whether it is media, politicians or civil society activists, are always concerned about Pakistan's role and mostly hold Islamabad responsible for destabilising Afghanistan," explained Hotak.<sup>34</sup>

The prime reason behind Pakistan's continued involvement in Afghanistan is its concern for Indian presence in the country. According to a former Afghan interior ministry official, after coming to power, President Ghani tried addressing this security concern of Pakistan and winning its confidence, despite severe opposition of the influential figures in his

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<sup>34</sup> Telephonic conversation with Basir Ahmed Hotak.

government,<sup>35</sup> During his government, senior officials shuttled back and forth between the two countries for bilateral engagements. Ghani cancelled military assistance from India, particularly the contract requests for purchasing heavy weapons made under the tenure of former President Hamid Karzai.<sup>36</sup> “Karzai had requested India for heavy weapons in view of Afghanistan’s tense relations with Pakistan, but Ghani cancelled a long-standing request to purchase heavy arms from India as a move to maintain a balanced relationship with Pakistan,” said the former interior ministry official.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the efforts, relations between the two countries remained tense. Pakistan's mistrust of the Ghani regime continued for its ties with India, and Afghans also continued raising question over Pakistan’s alleged support to the Taliban.

## 2. Media’s role

Considering media’s immense soft power to shape public opinion in the globalised world, its role in shaping Afghans' outlook of Pakistan cannot be overlooked. Background interviews with Afghan analysts and journalists suggest that the current affairs talk shows on Afghan TV channels have played a key role in shaping the common people’s perception of Pakistan.

Under the Taliban’s first rule from 1996-2001, Afghanistan’s independent media was almost non-existent; press was fully controlled by the regime. After the U.S.-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan, which ousted the Taliban from power, Afghans gained access to television with multiple

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<sup>35</sup> Telephonic conversation with Afghanistan's former interior ministry official. June 22, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Tahir Khan, "Ghani may decline Indian arms to build bridges with Pakistan, *The Express Tribune*, February 13, 2015, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/837964/ghani-may-decline-indian-arms-to-build-bridges-with-pakistan>

<sup>37</sup> Telephonic conversation with Afghanistan's former interior ministry official.

news channels and newly launched FM radio stations, which were catering to almost every stratum of society in the country.

Most TV talk shows in Afghanistan present Pakistan as an enemy country, and subsequently shape the public opinion about Islamabad. “If a TV anchor bashes Pakistan, the [viewership] rating of that talk show would go higher,” said a Kabul-based journalist.<sup>38</sup>

Because of airing of anti-Pakistani content, the state-run Pakistan Electronic Media and Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) banned the broadcast of the Afghanistan’s electronic media and the circulation of its print media multiple times in the past but lifted it later after protests by Afghans living in Pakistan. However, since 2013, Pakistan has blocked nearly all Afghan TV channels from being broadcast by cable operators in Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

However, through unregulated social media, Afghans have openly expressed their rage and revulsion for Pakistan. Soon after the Afghan Taliban’s takeover, use of the Twitter hashtag #SanctionPakistan by thousands of Afghans has shown the antipathy among them for the perceived role of Pakistan in bringing the Taliban to power. The logic goes that, without Pakistan’s alleged support for the Taliban, the Taliban would not have had the capability to topple the Ghani government.

An Al-Jazeera’ report citing data from the social media insight company, Talkwalker, said that the hashtag #SanctionPakistan was used more than 730,000 times from August 10 to August 12, with at least 37 percent of those tweets tagged as originating from Afghanistan. The tweets under this trend demanded the international community to hold Islamabad

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<sup>38</sup> Telephonic conversation with Syed, a Kabul-based journalist, who requested to use his single name for security reasons. June 22, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Tolo News, "Ban on Afghan TV in Pakistan causes backlash," December 23, 2013, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/ban-afghan-tv-pakistan-causes-backlash>

accountable for “supporting the Afghan Taliban militants and spreading chaos.”<sup>40</sup>

### 3. Situation after Kabul’s fall

When Kabul fell, some Pakistanis celebrated the Taliban’s return to power, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, who declared that Afghans had broken the “shackles of slavery.” Some Pakistanis also welcomed a perceived blow to India, a Pakistan’s arch-rival, which had close ties with the former Afghan governments.

In the weeks that followed, Pakistan launched a diplomatic effort urging the international community to engage with the Taliban, help ease Afghanistan’s humanitarian crisis and prevent it from descending into chaos again. For the first time, Pakistan even allowed India to transport humanitarian aid to Kabul through Pakistani territory. In December, foreign ministers of the 56 nations belonging to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), along with Taliban and U.S. delegates, gathered in Islamabad. The meeting focused on Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.

Despite these efforts, tensions have sometimes flared between Islamabad and Kabul, to the surprise of many in the region. Islamabad, who had previously blamed the Ghani regime for giving sanctuary to anti-Pakistan terrorist groups in Afghanistan, was confident the Afghan Taliban would be more active against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatist groups, such as the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front. As per the promises made by the Taliban in the Doha accord that it would not allow use of Afghanistan’s soil for cross-border

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<sup>40</sup> Al-Jazeera, "#SanctionPakistan trends as violence rages in Afghanistan," August 11, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/11/sanction-pakistan-twitter-trend-afghanistan-taliban>



terrorism, this expectation among Pakistani policymakers was well-grounded.

After taking control of the country and forming its government in August 2021, the Taliban have launched a crackdown on the members of various Baloch separatist groups that have been attacking Chinese interests in Pakistan, including projects linked with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, the new rulers in Kabul are unlikely to meet the demands of Islamabad to flush out sanctuaries of TTP militants, because they are part of an Al-Qaeda-led larger jihadist network that helped the Taliban in fighting against the NATO and Afghan forces and eventually capturing Afghanistan. Given this, Pakistan has now realised that friendship with the Afghan Taliban won't come quite as easily as was perceived earlier.

Weeks after the Taliban captured Kabul, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, the then head of Pakistan's influential Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, visited Afghanistan's capital. He was said to have flown there to talk to the Taliban over the composition of the interim government – some reports claimed there were differences between the Taliban and the Haqqani Network over key positions.

However, Hameed's visit to Kabul didn't create good optics and caused an increase in anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan. On the next day of his visit, a group of Afghan men and women staged a rally outside the Pakistani embassy in Kabul, which the Taliban had to disperse through aerial shooting. "Many in Afghanistan saw Hameed's presence in Kabul as confirmation of their belief that the Taliban are nothing more than a Pakistani stooge. It caused a huge humiliation for the Taliban regime too," asserted Syed, a Kabul-based journalist.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Telephonic conversation with Syed, a Kabul-based journalist.

In January 2022, Pakistan's then National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf cancelled his scheduled Afghanistan visit as a large number of protesters were expected to turn up at the Kabul airport for an anti-Pakistan demonstration. However, Pakistani officials claimed that the visit was postponed due to bad weather.<sup>42</sup> Yusuf was supposed to head a high-level delegation for talks on humanitarian aid for the Afghans and other issues of bilateral importance.

After failing in convincing the Afghan Taliban to take stern actions against the TTP, Pakistan security forces launched cross-border airstrikes on April 16 in Kunar and Khost provinces of Afghanistan that reportedly claimed more than 47 lives, including women and children.<sup>43</sup> The attacks caused severe backlash in Afghanistan, with many blaming Pakistan for violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty.

Taliban's Ministry of Defence called the attack tyrannical and warned that no country should provoke Afghanistan. Amir Khan Mutaqqi, the acting foreign minister of the Taliban, summoned the Pakistani ambassador and expressed his strong protest against the attacks.<sup>44</sup>

A Khost-based tribal elder shared that hundreds of people attended the protests against Pakistan for bombing and violating the country's sovereignty and chanted anti-Pakistan slogans. He held, "the cross-border bombing has recently increased anti-Pakistani sentiments among the residents of the Afghan provinces that shared borders with Afghanistan."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mudasir Ali Shah, "Amid planned protest, Yusuf scraps Kabul visit," Pajhwok, January 19, 2022, <https://pajhwok.com/2022/01/19/amid-planned-protest-yusuf-scraps-kabul-visit>

<sup>43</sup> Relief Web, "Pakistani airstrike leaves 47 civilians dead and 22 injured in Afghanistan's Khost and Kunar provinces," April 22, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/pakistani-airstrike-leaves-47-civilians-dead-and-22-injured-afghanistan-s-khost>

<sup>44</sup> [https://twitter.com/MoFA\\_Afg/status/1515286363280658436](https://twitter.com/MoFA_Afg/status/1515286363280658436)

<sup>45</sup> Telephonic conversation with a Khost-based tribal elder. June 20, 2022.

## 4. Border fencing

Another factor contributing to mistrust between the two countries is the fencing of the Durand Line issue. Pashtun nationalists have long been advocating for an open border to facilitate free movement and, hence, strongly reject the Pakistan's unilateral concealment of the border.

Durand Line, the international border between the two countries, was demarcated in 1893 following an agreement between the British Empire and the Afghan king. The Durand Line divides ethnic Pashtun tribes in the Pak-Afghan border areas and, hence, movement across the border was regular before Pakistan started fencing it. When Pakistan started the fencing in 2017, President Ghani's regime voiced its reservations calling it a "unilateral move to fence the de facto border, which divides families, tribes and communities and has not been officially recognised."<sup>46</sup> Differences over the status of the border have resulted in several fatal clashes between the two countries' border security forces.

Soon after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, several videos surfaced on social media where Afghan Taliban members were seen uprooting the fence along the border and chanting slogans against the fence. In at least two incidents in late December and early January, Afghan Taliban officials intervened to block the ongoing Pakistani project to erect fencing on Durand Line. In December, Pakistani forces attempted to erect fences in the Chahar Burjak district and near the Nangarhar province, both of which were thwarted by the Taliban fighters who destroyed installations and clashed with border forces. Afghan defence ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khwarazmi said Taliban forces stopped the Pakistani military

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<sup>46</sup> Amjad Hussain Dawar, "Pak-Afghan relations," *The News*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/927257-pak-afghan-relations>

from erecting what he called an “illegal” border fence along the Nangarhar province.<sup>47</sup>

In January 2022, another video appeared on social media to show Taliban forces destroying fencing built by the Pakistani military along the Durand Line.<sup>48</sup> In an interview with Tolo News, Mawllawi Sanullah Sangin, commander of the border forces for the eastern zone, said that the Taliban regime will not allow the fencing anytime, in any form. “Whatever they did before, they did, but we will not allow it anymore. There will be no fencing anymore.”<sup>49</sup>

Interviews with political commentators based in Kabul suggested that the anti-Pakistan sentiments are high in Afghanistan because of Islamabad’s perceived role as a main driver of instability. This is one reason that no government has ever formally accepted the Durand Line as a permanent border because it remains a highly emotional issue. According to a political analyst in Kabul, “The Taliban’s opposition of the fencing is aimed at gaining domestic legitimacy and to do away with the perception that they are a Pakistani proxy group.”<sup>50</sup>

## 5. Visa issuance

Before the fall of Kabul last year, thousands of Afghans crossed the Pak-Afghan border on daily basis. For instance, a 2014 study had noted “an unprecedented and unmonitored movement of around 56,000 people

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<sup>47</sup> Jibrán Ahmad, “Afghan Taliban stop Pakistan army from fencing international border,” Reuters, December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-stop-pakistan-army-fencing-international-border-2021-12-22>

<sup>48</sup> Tolo News, “‘Islamic Emirate’ forces on video destroy Durand Line fencing,” January 2, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176144>

<sup>49</sup> Sadaqat Ghorzang, “Islamic Emirate: No more fencing allowed on Durand Line,” Tolo News, January 5, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176188>

<sup>50</sup> Telephonic conversation with a Kabul-based political commentator. June 12, 2022.

daily, with more than 90 per cent of the flow originating from Afghanistan into Pakistan."<sup>51</sup>

To stem a potential tide of new refugees after the fall of Kabul, Pakistan allowed restricted pedestrian movement only for Pakistani citizens and Afghans with a visa. Unexpectedly, the numbers of Afghans crossing into Pakistan had not been as high as some had warned, border officials and refugee agencies observed. "People mainly flee from armed conflicts or other types of violence," said a Peshawar-based government official overseeing refugees' affairs. "But, this time, Afghanistan did not see any large-scale violence between the Taliban and security forces that could force people to be displaced from their homes."

Yet crossing the Pak-Afghan border and getting visit or residential visas for Pakistan are not easy. A section of Afghan media reported that the Pakistan's embassy in Kabul is allegedly selling visas in the black markets to let Afghan national travel or live in the neighbouring country. According to these unverifiable reports and accounts provided by some Afghan media, people could get a month-long visa by paying \$300, a five-month visa for \$500, and \$700 for a yearlong visa.<sup>52</sup> Ahmed Jan, an Afghan national from Kabul who brought his mother for treatment in Peshawar, said that patients are getting visit visas by directly applying to the embassy. "But others have to rely on the black market."<sup>53</sup>

Even after one has an approved visa from embassy, travelling to Pakistan is not without trouble. Firdous Ali, a trader in Jalalabad, said that extraordinary hardships and difficulties at the Torkham border have affected their business. With days long security checks at the border

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<sup>51</sup> Amina Khan, "Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: Post-2014 challenges." *Strategic Studies* 34, no. 2/3 (2014): 20–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527538>

<sup>52</sup> See for instance: Abdul Raqeeb Sail, "Pakistan's visa rate reaches \$750 in black market," Pajhwok, April 27, 2022, <https://pajhwok.com/2022/04/27/pakistans-visa-rate-reaches-750-in-black-market/>

<sup>53</sup> Telephonic conversation with Ahmed Jan, an Afghan national from Kabul. June 2022.

crossing, even bringing patients to Peshawar for medical treatment has become more and more difficult. “Both countries should address unnecessary difficulties in cross-border regulation in view of the plight of Afghan people,” he said.<sup>54</sup> However, he admitted that compared to Iran and other neighbouring countries, Pakistan’s overall attitude towards Afghans at the border and within its territories is hospitable.

Afghans who enter Pakistan from Torkham are mostly residents of Nangarhar province. Before the installation of biometric/border systems at Torkham, they had been coming over through the old British facility of Easement Rights (available to locals). Their movement was dependent on the goodwill of border guards. Now, with much stricter regulation and security check in place, they have to face what they call "maltreatment" at the hand of border security officials. This has partly also etched into their memories developing a dislike for Pakistan.

Frequent closure of borders also adds to their trouble and anti-Pakistan sentiments. According to one account, while the people living in Qila Abdullah and Chaman districts of Pakistan can cross either with Kandahar-issued or Pakistani ID cards, but Afghans having legal documents have to wait several days.<sup>55</sup>

## 6. Taliban are also not happy

Some within the Taliban ranks also have a strong negative view of Pakistan for its role in the U.S.-led war on terror. Others, despite having lived in Pakistan for years after the U.S. offensive against the Taliban, tried hiding their links with Pakistan to dismiss the common perception among Afghans that the Taliban are “Pakistani stooges”. Islamabad also denied the presence of the Taliban on its territory, as NATO forces targeted Taliban

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<sup>54</sup> Telephonic conversation with Firdous Ali, an Afghan trader from Jalalabad. June 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Tolo News, "Travellers face trouble at Spin Boldak, Chaman crossings," June 21, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178578>

cadres in 2001. For Taliban leadership and fighters, fleeing Afghanistan to hide in Pakistan was not an escape but a return home – back to the refugee camps and neighbourhoods where they were brought up in the 1980s and 90s.

Now, after the Taliban have regained control of the country and formed a government in Kabul, a number of their leaders and members who had been living in Pakistan for over two decades have moved back to their home country to join the government's various state functionaries. Most of them had served in Afghanistan during the Taliban's regime from 1996 to 2001 but some have also recently graduated from Pakistani madrassas and universities in various cities.<sup>56</sup>

After the dramatic ascent of the Taliban to power, their dependence on Pakistan has not radically changed. Owing to Afghanistan's economic collapse and a fast-approaching humanitarian crisis, many Taliban leaders and mid-ranking functionaries do not want to risk all by bringing their families into a country that many Afghans are eager to leave.

But despite all of it, the Taliban's reservations with Pakistan are long-standing and go beyond policy disputes. The Taliban suffered at Pakistan's hands when it arrested some of their leaders in 2010, including one of their founding leaders, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Current Deputy Prime Minister, who spent nearly a decade in a Pakistani prison. In 2002, Pakistan also arrested Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, and a year later, handed over to the United States.

A Taliban's mid-level leader in Karachi said that former Taliban detainees in Pakistan, who are now in key positions in the current government in Kabul, show little love for Pakistan and described Pakistanis as

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<sup>56</sup> Zia Ur-Rehman and Emily Schmil, "The Taliban have staffing issues: They are looking for help in Pakistan," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/world/taliban-members.html>

‘untrustworthy’ and “controlling”.<sup>57</sup> He believed that the Taliban would like to reduce their dependence on Pakistan for forging wider alliances with other countries, including India. In early June, Afghanistan’s all-powerful Defence Minister Mullah Yaqub, son of the Taliban founder Mullah Omar, expressed willingness to send Afghan army personnel to India for military training, saying they “don’t have any issue with it.”<sup>58</sup>

At the fourth quarterly expert consultation on “Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan’s interests and policy options” organised by Pak Institute for Peace Studies in Islamabad on June 9, most of the Pakistani and Afghan participants agreed on growing mistrust among the Taliban leaders in Kabul on Pakistani government, and even Pakistani society, particular media.

Despite the rising tensions between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan, many anti-Taliban Afghans are still sceptical as to how the Taliban can have disagreements with Pakistan. “Taliban, often branded as close allies of Pakistan, are taking a visibly hostile approach in a bid to win praise from Afghan nationalists and enhance their domestic legitimacy,” said Tahir Khan, an Islamabad-based journalist who closely monitors the Taliban affairs.<sup>59</sup>

## 7. Border trade

Recent obstacles in trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan have also been causing a negative impact on relationship between the two countries. As Afghanistan is a landlocked country, many Afghans depend on Pak-Afghan trade for their livelihood. Khan Jan Alokozay, President of Pakistan Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PAJCCI),

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with a mid-level Taliban leader in Karachi. January 21, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> “Taliban willing to send Afghan troops to India for training: Mullah Yaqoob,” *The Express Tribune*, June 4, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2360038/no-issues-in-sending-army-personnel-to-india-for-training-taliban>

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Tahir Khan, an Islamabad-based journalist. June 9, 2022.



believes there are several impediments like withdrawal of cash-on-counter facility, requirement of advance payments and reluctance of banks to accept third party payment in case of Afghanistan leading to halted trade across the border.<sup>60</sup> These obstacles could cause a widening trade gap, loss of livelihood, increased hardships for people, and unrest in border areas. The non-issuance of Electronic Import Form (EIF) by State Bank of Pakistan has also gravely affected transactions, led to halting of consignments, and created sort of congestion at the border.

Afghanistan has been facing a deepening financial crisis ever since the Taliban seized power. The crisis is becoming deeper because the country's international accounts and assets have been frozen by the United States and other key financial institutions. Facing an acute shortage of foreign currency, especially U.S. dollars, to carry on normal trade with other countries, the Taliban government has instructed all citizens, shopkeepers, traders, businessmen and the general public to conduct all transactions in Afghanis and strictly refrain from using a foreign currency.<sup>61</sup>

"Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers are not able to use formal banking channels, while on the other hand, Pakistan has also been facing pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to carry out trade with transparency strictly using banking channels only."<sup>62</sup> According to Wakilur Rehman, a Pakistani journalist covering Pak-Afghan trade, "now, in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule, traders of both countries are compelled to adopt dual methods for sending export and receiving import consignments – one for fulfilling legal

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<sup>60</sup> Aziz Buner, "Border hurdles hurt Pak-Afghan trade," *Profit*, January 31, 2022, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/01/31/border-hurdles-hurt-pak-afghan-trade>

<sup>61</sup> [https://twitter.com/Zabehulah\\_M33/status/1455716210537021442](https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1455716210537021442)

<sup>62</sup> Wakil-ur-Rehman, "Two parallel payment systems in vogue for Pak-Afghan trade," *Samaa*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.samaaenglish.tv/news/2450718>

requirements and the second using barter or alternate payment mode using the Hawala and Hundi system.”<sup>63</sup>

Azmat Achakzai, a Chaman-based trader, highlighted that fruit and vegetable traders have become poorer due to the sudden closure of *Bard* as fruits and vegetables spoil quickly. It is also increasing anti-Pakistan sentiments among Afghan traders.” Achakzai recommended for Pakistan to “create a friendly environment for Afghan businessmen so that trade and love grow together.”<sup>64</sup>

## 8. What should be done?

Most Afghans interviewed for this research suggested that instead of relying on or leaving it to the governments of the two countries, there is a need to develop and enhance people-to-people contacts at different levels to build trust and cement bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Youth, parliamentarians, religious scholars, academics and non-governmental organisations of both countries should meet and discuss bilateral affairs.

Pakistan and Afghanistan need to realise that the geopolitical realities are not the same as they used to be prior to the 9/11 attacks. Regional dynamics have also changed. There are now more players and new actors that have taken central stage in the global and regional politics. People on both sides should be realistic enough to accept and adapt to the emerging ground realities.

The recent earthquake in Khost and Paktika provinces of Afghanistan has provided Pakistan with an opportunity to extend its support to quake-affected people of the neighbouring country which could help in reducing anti-Pakistan sentiments to a great level. The deadliest earthquake that

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Wakil-ur-Rehman, a Karachi based journalist. June 12, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Telephonic conversation with Azmat Achakzai. June 2022.

killed over 1,000 people and injured many more comes at a difficult time for the Taliban-ruled country, currently suffering from hunger, poverty and economic crisis.

Initiating cross-border economic activities, trade, and social exchanges could also build stronger relations, forcing governments to sit and discuss ways forward too. Both countries despite having a fence could mend their relations if the people on both sides join hands for economic, trade and social exchanges.

Lastly, Pakistan should look upon Afghanistan as a sovereign country having freedom to develop ties with other countries. It must also stop relying on the Taliban regime in power and should engage with other political and ethnic groups of Afghanistan, in line with its policy to build trust and strong bilateral relations with Afghans.