

CONSULTATION REPORT

AFGHAN PEACE AND RECONCILIATION: PAKISTAN'S INTERESTS AND POLICY OPTIONS

Report of PIPS Consultation-12 held on March 15, 2024, in Islamabad

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Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS)

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Likewise, PIPS is thankful to all the learned resource persons who participated in this Twelfth quarterly consultation and shared their expert knowledge on the subject. PIPS hopes to benefit from their knowledge and insights in the future too.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies held its 12th quarterly consultation on “Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan’s interests and policy options” in Islamabad on March 15, 2024. The consultation focused on two main themes: “Pakistan’s Afghan policy puzzle: challenges and opportunities for the new government” and “The counterterrorism and counter-extremism challenges for the new federal and provincial governments.” Participants included lawmakers from national and provincial assemblies, diplomats, retired military officials, academics, journalists, policy analysts, and experts on Afghan affairs.

The distinguished speakers talked about the policy challenges confronting the new government. They were particularly skeptical about the new government’s ability to formulate the country’s Afghan policy, and were worried about surging terrorism in the country, India’s increasing influence in Afghanistan, province-center worsening relations, and Pakistan’s deteriorating relations with the neighboring countries.

In the first session, the discussion revolved around how the newly formed coalition government will address critical issues such as countering terrorism and improving relations with Afghanistan and other neighboring countries. The need for a solution to Balochistan problem was highlighted. Apart from that, various factors leading to worsening relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan were discussed, for instance the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) factor, deportation of Afghan refugees, border insecurity, and cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan. The participants also linked the success of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to peace in the region.

Pakistan’s failure to extend goodwill into Afghanistan was termed a significant problem. It was argued that Pakistan’s forceful expulsion of Afghan refugees significantly eroded Pakistan’s good image in Afghanistan. The participants urged the government to take political ownership of foreign and internal policies and strengthen the role of parliament in order to set things right both at home and abroad. However, they lamented the inability of the political government to assert itself, thereby allowing space to non-democratic forces to decide unilaterally on critical matters.

In the second session, the consultation focused on the counterterrorism policies in the center and provinces. The prevailing antagonistic relations between Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf’s (PTI) government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and the coalition government in Islamabad were thought to prevent the formation of an effective counterterrorism policy. Speakers also highlighted how India is exploiting the situation by funneling funds to the TTP through Afghanistan, which has led to a significant surge in the terrorist activities in Pakistan. Improving trade relations with Afghanistan also came under the discussion, and it was advised to reduce hurdles in bilateral trade which will benefit not only Afghanistan but Pakistan as well. It was also highlighted that although there is peace in a political sense in Afghanistan, poverty and economic decay have increased during the Taliban government.

In the last minutes of the discussion, it was underscored that the Afghan Taliban deliberately designate Pakistan as their enemy and capitalize on this rhetoric to divert the attention of Afghans away from the system they are implementing, which might lead to further destitution.



Muhammad Amir Rana, director Pak Institute for Peace Studies (Moderator)

To initiate the discussion, I would like to invite Mr. Tahir Khan to share his insights regarding the challenges confronting the new government in formulating Afghan policy and dealing with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) issue.

Tahir Khan, senior journalist and expert on Afghan affairs

A few days ago, the Pakistani chargé d'affaires traveled to Kandahar, engaging in meetings with key figures of the Taliban government, including its foreign and trade ministers. Following the visit of an Indian special envoy, there has been a notable uptick in visits from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Could it be that the Indian envoy's visit sparked concerns in Pakistan? Recently, the Pakistani ambassador also met with Mullah Shirin. While Afghan media outlets reported on this, it went unmentioned in Pakistani media.

Amir Khan Muttaqi's recent statement expressing the Taliban's optimism about potential improvements in relations with the new Pakistani government grabbed my attention. Typically, Afghan diplomats exercise caution in public remarks, whereas Pakistani officials tend to react primarily to specific events, such as the Indian envoy's recent visit mentioned earlier.

Afghanistan harbors numerous grievances against Pakistan. However, it's Ishaq Dar's foreign policy that will pose the most significant challenge for Pakistan's new government. When questioned about policy formation following the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) government formation, Shah Mahmood Qureshi resolutely stated, "here." However, I doubt the same can be said regarding policies for Afghanistan. The new government will inevitably confront this challenge. In December, Nawaz Sharif expressed a desire for fostering positive relations with both Afghanistan and India. The critical question now is whether civilians will actively engage in these diplomatic endeavors.

Since the Taliban's rise to power, I've made seven trips to Afghanistan, meeting key figures like Sirajuddin Haqqani. Through these visits, I've come to view the Taliban differently—they're not Pakistan's enemies but rather harbor concerns about Pakistan's approach towards Afghanistan. Pakistan's "loudspeaker policy," as former ambassadors have labeled it, is a significant problem. This policy, characterized by imprudent statements, has strained the bilateral relations. Additionally, a lack of clear political ownership exacerbates the situation. It's unclear whether our political leaders are unable or unwilling to prioritize the Afghan issue.

Our failure to extend goodwill into Afghanistan is a significant issue. Despite our differences, Afghans have consistently praised our efforts in caring for refugees. While it's within our rights to deport individuals living illegally, it's crucial to consider the context. In this case, these individuals had been residing illegally for 43 years.

Furthermore, the manner in which the caretaker government addressed these issues was notably harsh. Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar's statement exemplifies this, as he declared,

“I am starting by sending the refugees back because the Taliban government has said that TTP is Pakistan’s problem, and Pakistan has to solve it itself.” Even though he was a caretaker, he was regarded as prime minister in Afghanistan. This situation has eroded our goodwill.

Moreover, claiming that we [the civilian government] are on the same page [with the military] is a major fabrication; the reality is that we are never truly on the same page. It often feels like there is only Rawalpindi or Aabpara page. On the other hand, India’s diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan are commendable and pose a significant challenge for the new government in Pakistan. Without clarity or a defined role in policymaking, navigating this terrain will undoubtedly be a formidable challenge.

Indeed, the TTP remains a persistent problem, one likely to persist. Establishing positive relations with Afghanistan would prove challenging if the TTP issue remains unresolved. The question of how to address the TTP issue looms large. Previous attempts at talks have been made, but as I mentioned earlier, Sirajuddin Haqqani expressed dissatisfaction with our behavior during those negotiations.

However, those talks were fraught with risks. Their failure can largely be attributed to the divergent demands of the TTP and the Pakistani government, which proved insurmountable. But I doubt the Afghan Taliban will agree to mediate these talks again. If Pakistan genuinely wants to address its problems, it must step forward and take ownership of the process.

Another issue is that we often send individuals to engage in talks with Afghanistan who may not be perceived as relevant or influential enough. It’s crucial to send representatives who are taken seriously and have the necessary authority to negotiate effectively.

I consistently hear from the Taliban in Afghanistan that Pakistan’s focus is primarily on security matters during discussions. They feel that other important topics such as trade, transit, and connectivity are often neglected. I agree with their perspective. While security is undoubtedly crucial, focusing solely on this aspect limits the scope of our discussions and weakens the potential for building stronger relationships. It’s imperative that we broaden the conversation to encompass a wider range of issues if we genuinely seek to foster better relations.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Tahir Khan. Now, I invite Dr. Qamar Cheema to discuss Pakistan’s Afghan policy and its objectives. Additionally, should institutions grant political ownership to the parliament?

Dr. Qamar Cheema, political and security analyst

For the past 50 years, Pakistan’s understanding of Afghanistan has been lacking, evident in our failure to anticipate the current state of affairs post-August 15, 2021. Despite our historical ties and interconnectedness, we overlooked the rise of the Taliban. Afghani-

stan has always been intricately linked to Pakistan's global identity; during the Cold War era, it was often said that to reach Afghanistan, one had to pass through Pakistan first. Even after 9/11, this dynamic persisted. The failure to accurately assess potential dynamics of Afghanistan is a shared failure of our security institutions, parliament, and intelligence agencies. Despite widespread advocacy for the Taliban, including statements from our Prime Minister urging assistance for Afghanistan, we found ourselves in a precarious position as the Afghan Taliban continued to harbor the TTP. Now, we must acknowledge this oversight and work towards resolution. It's a collective failure on Pakistan's part.

We do not have out of the box solution. We want to maintain the status quo in our approach. In his book on the Taliban, Dr. Hassan Abbas highlighted General Qamar Javed Bajwa's progressive vision of seeking normalization with India and Afghanistan. This forward-looking approach presented a significant opportunity. However, it's essential to examine why this vision didn't translate into consistent action. Recently, India provided humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Had this aid been routed through Pakistan, it could have demonstrated Pakistan's willingness to facilitate such assistance, potentially paving the way for normalization and showcasing our commitment to regional stability. We have repeatedly advocated for a shift from a purely geostrategic approach to one grounded in geoeconomics. This shift could have facilitated direct communication with India, which we often attempt through intermediaries. Shahbaz Sharif's recent remarks in the UAE about supporting the normalization of Pakistan-India relations underscore the importance of pursuing such avenues.

Either we are in a state of confusion, or our stakeholders are too deeply entrenched in political maneuvers, leaving us unable to effectively tackle foreign policy challenges. Consequently, the political class becomes consumed with self-preservation, neglecting strategic considerations. Allowing India to participate could have reshaped global perceptions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While we've made strides in infrastructural development, facilitating India's transit to Afghanistan through Pakistan would have elevated our efforts. Currently, India collaborates with Iran to safeguard its trade routes through the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, revitalizing agreements and initiatives like the Chabahar Port. Pakistan has failed to assert its relevance in this context. Despite our claims of transitioning from a geostrategic to geoeconomic stance, we remain trapped in a conspiratorial mindset, hindering progress. It's imperative to break free from this restrictive perspective.

To what extent does the current government wield influence in parliament, and can the parliament truly take ownership of policies? Presently, doubts regarding credibility and trust plague the current parliamentary landscape. Recently, Donald Lu testified before the American Congress regarding Pakistani elections, raising concerns. It's crucial for the political class, especially nationalists, to step up and take responsibility for policies, with state backing. Moreover, the parliament must assert its authority. Endowed with the mandate and votes of the people, both the National Assembly and the Senate, along with foreign policy committees, should assert their roles. Robust discussions on foreign policy are necessary, and the opposition should apply pressure to prevent overreliance

on unelected institutions, safeguarding democratic trust from further erosion.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Qamar Cheema. When it comes to Pakistan-Afghanistan policy, three capitals come to our mind: Delhi, Washington D.C., and Beijing. Now, I invite Dr. Fazl-ur-Rahman to enlighten us on China's perspective towards Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with its expectations. We would also request him to elaborate on China's evolving relations with Afghanistan.

Dr. Fazl-ur-Rahman, director of Pakistan Council on China, Islamabad

China's approach to Afghanistan reflects a consistent, goal-oriented policy, which is primarily centered on fostering stability in the region and addressing terrorism concerns. China also maintains economic interests in Afghanistan. However, amidst the escalating competition between China and the United States, China aims to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a pawn in geopolitical maneuvers. Recent statements by American officials regarding reclaiming the Bagram Air Base and elements within CENTCOM's strategy suggest potential challenges. China's existing agreements with Afghanistan underscore its concerns about instability in the region.

The Chinese have concerns over Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. I visited China multiple times in the past five months and met the Chinese academics. They were upset with Pakistan's forceful expulsion of the illegal Afghan refugees thinking that this move would create more bitterness between the two neighbors. Besides this, the Chinese are perturbed about Pakistan itself. They believe that Pakistan's capacity to play a meaningful role in the region is not only diminishing but getting marginalized and its relevance is decreasing in the regional developments.

China has increased its direct communication with Afghanistan. Pakistan used to be a fulcrum for Chinese policy towards the Muslim world and the rest of the world. We were a gateway for China, a position that we have already lost. In the area of connectivity, China has established connectivity with Iran, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. So, the relevance of Pakistan's strategic location about which we have had many hopes that it would give us strategic benefits is gradually dwindling. I don't see in the foreseeable future China giving the current government a chunk of investment or any breakthrough in CPEC which it expects.

There are several factors contributing to this situation. Pakistan's policy, largely steered by the so-called Bajwa or Munir doctrine, advocates for maintaining an equidistant or balanced approach towards the United States and China. This stance is a main factor driven by the belief that deviating from it could jeopardize Pakistan's interests amidst the escalating rivalry between the two global powers. I think the Chinese gave a very clear message by saying that India has defined its strategic position and has aligned itself with the US and now it is Pakistan's turn to align with China or the US. China wants clear cut positions of countries regarding the US in both regional and global contexts. In the

Cold war Pakistan could benefit from both sides. Now, facing an economic crisis and a diminishing political clout, Pakistan finds it hard to manage a balance in its relationship with the US and China. We must see this because our security interests are linked with our relations with the countries in the region. Furthermore, Pakistan should consider its checkered history with the US; whenever its interests were served, it abandoned us. Conversely, when examining the historical relationship with China, there is a consistent goodwill and a sense of nurturing towards Pakistan.

We need to revisit our Afghan policy. As far as the new government is concerned, everybody knows that in our security policy and our relations with immediate neighbors, mainly India and Afghanistan, the say of military establishment prevails. Therefore, until and unless there is a meaningful dialogue between the civilian and military establishment, things may not move forward.

I don't believe the issue lies in a lack of understanding of our Afghan policy. Rather, it's the absence of a clear vision for the subsequent steps beyond the initial phases. Once we take the first and second steps and make some progress, we often find ourselves at a loss regarding the next steps. Pakistan's policies need to be guided by specific strategic objectives, providing a clear direction. We must develop a comprehensive plan, and fortunately, the Chinese are willing to assist us. However, they expect responsible behavior from our end in return.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Fazl-ur-Rahman. Now, I'd like to invite Mr. Riffatullah Orakzai to shed light on the preferences of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government concerning Afghanistan, the security situation in Pakistan, and the trade-related challenges, along with the government's strategy to address these issues.

Riffatullah Orakzai, journalist, and security analyst from Peshawar

Given the formative stage of the KP government, it may be premature for me to provide detailed insights on these issues. However, it's worth noting that the previous governments led by the PTI in the KP province also did not actively engage with Afghanistan on security or trade matters.

Following the end of the PTI government at the federal level, the party continued to hold power in KP province. However, despite the deteriorating security situation in the province, the provincial PTI government failed to take ownership of its responsibilities and instead shifted blame onto Shahbaz Sharif or federal government for various issues.

While the federal government typically handles major security issues such as talks with the militants and kinetic actions, the provincial government still bears responsibility for addressing security issues within its jurisdiction. However, the newly formed PTI government in KP indeed faces its own set of challenges, compounded by a strained relationship with the federal government.

Addressing issues related to resource allocation and compensation from the central government will be the top priority of the newly formed government in KP. While KP is financially suffering, I don't see anything clear that the government can talk about.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Riffatullah Orakzai. Now, I'd like to welcome Mr. Haroon Rashid to shed light on whether the PTI's approach to negotiating with the TTP has evolved. With a provincial government in place, is there a specific individual or faction within the PTI tasked with addressing the Afghanistan and TTP components of policy?

Haroon Rashid, Managing Editor of The Independent Urdu

Imran Khan used to devise the PTI strategy, and he is behind bars. So, it does not look like there is a direction which used to be before. For the last 6 months or so the party is facing its own challenges. PTI's whole fight is currently directed against the security establishment that is a prime target of the TTP also. As of now there is no clear indication that PTI or the PDM 2.0 has devised a strategy on how to move forward. In these early stages, it's essential to allow time for the new administration to establish itself. Notably, there has been a decrease in TTP-claimed attacks, though that does not mean the group has weakened or changed. Speculation arises regarding Maulana Fazl Ur Rehman's pre-election visit to Afghanistan potentially influencing this shift. Reports suggest a ceasefire during elections, yet no official confirmation has emerged. Concerns also persist over the lack of focus on addressing security challenges both nationally and provincially, particularly in the hometown of the new KP Chief Minister, i.e. Dera Ismail Khan, where attacks persist. Speculation surrounds ongoing backchannel communications and talks, with the Afghan Taliban potentially playing a significant role. Pakistan's appeals to the Afghan Taliban to pressure the TTP may have contributed to reduced violence. However, the TTP remains active and recently absorbed Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, potentially bolstering its capabilities.

As Mohsin Naqvi has been made the interior minister in the center and in KP the corresponding position is held by the chief minister himself so I am not sure how things will go ahead. It seems that establishment's hold on the security affairs will strengthen with the coming of Naqvi. He is the establishment's representative so the establishment will manage its interests through him. And I don't think the current parliament will be more effective than the past ones. The former ones were not allowed to talk about these things. They would give advice but were not allowed to exercise their authority. Security will not be the focus of the current government. Focus will be on the economy. At the moment the focus is on how to get IMF's next tranche.

On the Afghanistan front, there is a deadlock – a kind of paralysis. The Taliban's refusal to attend a recent UN session in Doha reflects their perception of their own strength. We all know that the Taliban are deeply religious and have continued public beatings and hangings. They don't have any intention of bringing any change in their policy towards women. However, the common people are happy with the peace which they think has

come with the Taliban. Daily bombings and other acts of terror have ended. However, figures about their social life tell a different story. A couple of days ago Save the Children said that 37% increase has been observed in child labor in Afghanistan. This is because the economic conditions are not improving. Afghan media seldom covers these issues. Despite claims of appreciation [of Afghani currency], there is a stark reality of limited purchasing power and high unemployment. In regions like Helmand, where poppy cultivation has ceased, alternatives for livelihoods have not been adequately provided.

The Americans assert that the Taliban have not made progress on any of the three or four criteria set for their recognition over the past two years. Without advancement on these criteria, it appears unlikely that the Taliban will receive recognition in the near future. However, this deadlock may provide an opportunity for groups like the TTP or Al Qaeda to exploit the situation, gaining both space and time.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Haroon Rashid. Now, I invite Mr. Shahzada Zulfiqar to tell us about the security situation in Balochistan and whether a shift in security situation/policy will take place with the coming of new government. Also, what are the preferences of security establishment in Balochistan?

Shahzada Zulfiqar, Quetta-based senior journalist, ex-president PFUJ

From the beginning, we have a confused policy about Balochistan: “we are going to talk” and “we are not going to talk” to individuals called disgruntled Baloch. In Balochistan, policy is largely dictated by the establishment’s approach.

Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch’s involvement in engaging with disgruntled Baloch individuals¹ is notable. However, it seems that there were obstacles in his path. It is recalled that he informed General Bajwa about his interactions with disgruntled Baloch individuals and expressed frustration over the perceived inaction of stakeholders. The question being asked now by everyone is why nothing was done.

Additionally, there was a prevailing belief among some that Ashraf Ghani’s government in Afghanistan did not prioritize or value the pursuit of peace. “India is involved in Afghanistan and things will improve in Pakistan once the Taliban seize control,” was often heard.

Based on what I’ve heard and understood, the Baloch elements in Afghanistan were apprehensive and fearful about the implications of the change in government following the Taliban’s takeover. However, they are now satisfied seeing that the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is strained. They are exploiting this situation in the same manner as the TTP.

The newly elected government in Balochistan is peculiar because the chief minister, Sar-

1 The term is usually used for Baloch insurgents or separatists.

faraz Bugti, who was not initially affiliated with the Pakistan People Party (PPP), has consistently advocated for the elimination of separatists. Previously, he emphasized that only the state should hold a monopoly on the use of violence. He cited Israel as an example. I was one of the panelists in that conference. I told him that no one should be allowed to use violence. However, after a while, he acknowledged that he had misrepresented the situation and clarified that he did not endorse Israel.

I don't think he believes in state's monopoly over violence himself as he always talks about reconciliation policies. From where he comes from, there the economy depends on this kind of violence. Many people believed, at the time of the Mach incident, that he would have a difficult time becoming CM again since the next CM would have to be someone who could broker a settlement with the separatists. For three days, the road from Quetta to Jacobabad was closed, and Quetta was isolated from the interior. It is worrying that militants can appear and disappear whenever they like. We can claim that they came from Afghanistan or Iran, but there is no border of Afghanistan, India, or Iran here [Mach and surrounding areas]. It takes 15 to 20 days to cross the border on foot from here, and 4 to 5 days on a bike.

Resolving the Mahrang Baloch issue or addressing the concerns of protestors against enforced disappearances in Turbat could have potentially improved the situation. Following their departure from Turbat, protestors marched through Quetta and on to Kohlu. Despite a demonstration in Barkhan, there is no sign of militancy emerging. The protests have impacted individuals, but the extent of government engagement with youth remains unclear. Sarfaraz Bugti's statement about ending job sales acknowledges past practices, indicating a need for change. Lack of opportunities often drives young people towards drugs, militancy, and other risky behaviors, yet the government's investment in youth engagement remains uncertain.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Shahzada Zulfiqar. Now, I invite Lt. General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi to comment on the PTI's approach towards Afghanistan while serving as the opposition in parliament. Furthermore, what are the expected security and Afghan policies of the new government?

Lt. General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi, former Defence Secretary and Minister of Defence of Pakistan

The PDM 2.0 is the continuation of PDM 1.0, and the interim government. The way the transition took place, is an open secret. Some individuals from the PDM 1.0 were in the interim government and are now in the PDM 2.0. It is expected that the new government will continue what has already been happening. The lingering question remains: will the civilian government have the freedom to make decisions devoid of influences from somewhere else?

Everyone is advocating for Pakistan to establish positive relations with Afghanistan and

suggesting various methods to achieve this goal. However, why is it that we struggle to implement these suggestions? What kind of foreign policy is it when a country's relations with all its neighboring nations are strained? Despite knowing what needs to be done, we seem unable to execute it. Our policy is heavily influenced by external factors, hindering us from pursuing our broader and crucial interests.

Afghanistan significantly impacts Pakistan politically, economically, and in terms of security. Surprisingly, neither our prime minister nor foreign minister visited Afghanistan, nor did our army chief. We seem to await signals from the international community before recognizing the Taliban government. While China is a staunch ally of Pakistan, recent developments have raised suspicions. China's active involvement in development projects in Afghanistan contrasts with its reluctance for Pakistan to recognize the Taliban government. Interestingly, even though Russia does not formally recognize the Taliban government, President Vladimir Putin personally welcomed the Afghan ambassador. It seems China is fully engaging with Afghanistan as it would with any recognized state, but it is cautious about Pakistan's potential increased involvement in Afghanistan – particularly in terms of trade and influence.

While keeping its own interests in mind Pakistan should decide what kind of relations to have with Iran and other countries. Diplomats say that it is not a zero-sum game, and one has to keep good relations with every country. However, this is not possible sometimes. The ideal situation is to have good relations with every country, but it needs to be seen with which country one's the major interest aligns. China is in Afghanistan and Russia has also influence there. In Iran as well, China and Russia have influence but Pakistan is nowhere. This is because we are trying to balance out. We must reflect on history to discern those who discard us after exploiting our assistance and those who stand by us, especially considering our geographical proximity. This isn't a difficult task.

There are numerous opportunities for constructive engagement, particularly with Afghanistan. Yet, no high-level visit has been made to Afghanistan, crucial matters such as border markets remain undiscussed, and efforts to ease travel have yet to yield results. The humane repatriation of refugees is also pending, indicating a policy influenced by external actors. The success of CPEC hinges on access to Central Asian countries, with Afghanistan and Iran posing as obstacles. Therefore, prioritizing the improvement of relations with Afghanistan and Iran should be at the forefront of our foreign policy agenda.

I've emphasized repeatedly that we are in an era dominated by economics and geoeconomics, which are closely intertwined with geopolitics and geostrategy. Pakistan's economic prosperity is contingent upon a conducive geopolitical environment. Without internal cohesion and positive external relations, our geoeconomic ambitions cannot materialize. Therefore, our policy framework needs a comprehensive revisit. We must prioritize rectifying our foreign policy before addressing economic concerns.

At the state-to-state level, questions regarding the nature of governance in a country or its treatment of certain demographics, such as women and children, are not necessarily responsible inquiries. Pakistan maintains friendly relations with countries that have had

restrictive policies towards women in the past or lack democracy. We have never raised such questions with them. Suddenly, with Afghanistan, we've begun scrutinizing these issues. It's imperative for Pakistan to enhance its ties with Afghanistan to secure access to Central Asia and ensure the success of CPEC. If we can engage in dialogue with Afghanistan through the assistance of China and other regional players, we should seize that opportunity.

Dialogue is essential in all circumstances. It's not a matter of whether we should engage in talks, but rather what topics should be discussed. Whether it's with the TTP or any other party, the focus should be on determining the agenda and objectives of such discussions.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Lt. General (Retd) Naeem Khalid Lodhi. Now, I invite Mr. Ali Muhammad Khan to enlighten us on the PTI leadership's decision regarding the policy towards Afghanistan and the envisaged direction for the new government.

Ali Muhammad Khan, Member of National Assembly & former Federal Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs

In a unique and pressing situation, it's crucial not to turn a blind eye. Improving our relationships with neighbors hinges on getting our own house in order. Recent events, such as a political party facing obstacles despite significant support and subsequent electoral setbacks, undermine Pakistan's credibility on the global stage. A lack of trust among citizens and a failure to prioritize national unity hinder our democratic image.

Our people vehemently reject war. For the past four to five decades, KP has been engulfed in conflict. A significant portion of our society has been ingrained with the notion that valor lies in defending Islam, wielding arms as adornments, and charging into battle on horseback. Despite these challenges, Pakistan's unity is forged through the two-nation theory, the national ideology, and the constitution. It's crucial to dispel the misconception that Pashtuns solely embody violence; they are inherently sensitive individuals. While Sindhis and Punjabis are scarce in KP and elsewhere, Pashtuns are present across the country, establishing businesses and adapting to diverse environments. Pakistan can leverage this diversity as both a strength and a weakness. Indeed, Pashtuns represent an economic powerhouse that Pakistan can harness for its development.

Allama Iqbal foresaw the significance of Central Asia, highlighting Afghanistan as its heart. The PTI government, upon assuming power, prioritized ending decades of suffering in the region. The Afghan conflict not only affected Afghanistan but also inflicted hardships on Pashtuns, as evinced by the proliferation of weapons and drugs in KP post-Afghan war. PTI's efforts included diplomatic initiatives, such as a significant financial contribution to Afghanistan in 2019. Despite past mistakes and resulting tensions, Pakistan's support for Afghanistan's peace remains steadfast. Ultimately, Afghanistan's future should be determined by its people, and external interventions, like Russia's, are

unwarranted.

In recent history, a significant milestone occurred when the PTI government, after a gap of 50 years since Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era, organized two OIC conferences on Afghanistan during a crucial period of peace efforts. PTI's approach to Afghanistan stems from the belief that Pakistan holds a responsibility within the Muslim Ummah to address its challenges. Despite constraints, such as limited actions beyond a joint resolution on Gaza, PTI remains committed to advocating for Muslim causes. Concerns persist over recurring Israeli aggression in Bait ul Maqdis during Ramadan, underscoring the challenges of addressing external issues amid domestic turmoil. Amidst ongoing Afghan peace talks, PTI made concerted efforts by convening conferences, signaling solidarity and support for peace in Afghanistan. This proactive stance resonated in Kabul, where Islamabad's genuine empathy and diplomatic efforts were recognized, marking a departure from past indifference. Imran Khan's directive underscores Pakistan's commitment to respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty while offering assistance in achieving peace through Afghan-led processes.

Is it a matter of doing Afghanistan a favor by fostering good relations with them? Not at all; cultivating positive ties with them is in Pakistan's best interest. Afghanistan has demonstrated resilience against the onslaught of two superpowers. Given the unresolved issue of Kashmir, compounded by India's presence in Afghanistan, prospects for improved relations with India seem bleak. Conversely, enhancing peace in Afghanistan through proactive initiatives could open up the Central Asian market for Pakistani businesses. The potential for regional stability hinges on fostering ties with Iran as well. Recognizing the Taliban government need not be a unilateral decision but rather a collective effort by Pakistan, akin to China's pragmatic approach. It's imperative to prioritize national interests, acknowledging that peace in Afghanistan and improved international relations are vital for Pakistan's prosperity. Such considerations transcend changes in government leadership; instead, they underscore the persisting necessity of fostering enduring relations with Afghanistan. The pivotal role of KP province and the Pashtun populace cannot be overstated, as Pakistan's connections with Pashtuns on both sides of the border are integral. While the border may persist, bridging distances is imperative for regional harmony and Pakistan's broader diplomatic goals.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Ali Muhammad Khan. Now, I invite Ms. Shaista Jadoon to share her insights on how to resolve the TTP issue.

Ms. Shaista Jadoon, Member of National Assembly

Pakistan has been entrusted to us [PML-N] by the people through vote. We have consistently upheld the democratic motto and its values with the utmost regard. Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif have always taken significant measures to address concerns in Afghanistan. Despite facing economic difficulties in the past and being significantly impacted by the situation in Afghanistan, we have continued to provide

shelter to our Afghan brothers. These days, there are numerous reasons why we are compelled to evacuate them. We are not making decisions independently, but the PPP is also involved. Our decisions are based on the consensus and agreement among all the parties involved.

Afghanistan presents a pressing issue that demands our attention. We should engage in discussions with Afghan authorities regarding border security and TTP insurgency. As a physician, I have visited numerous refugee camps, and as part of an initiative, we have provided them with access to emergency rooms. In addition to this, we have provided them with other excellent opportunities. For women, having access to a hospital equipped with high-quality delivery facilities is essential. After providing them with significant assistance, we are now evacuating them, which is crucial because some terrorists have been using the refugee status from Afghanistan as a cover.

While securing Pakistan has always been our top priority, we consider the Afghans as our brothers and sisters. I am optimistic about the positive actions my government will take in Afghanistan. Moreover, Afghanistan has always greatly benefited from our generosity.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Ms. Shaista Jadoon. Now, I invite Dr. Shabana Fayyaz to share her perspective with us.

Dr. Shabana Fayyaz, Chairperson DSS at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad

We often externalize our security concerns, perhaps for various reasons. We frequently perceive Iran, Afghanistan, and India as potential threats. Moreover, we sometimes associate these threats with involvement from the US and Israel. However, there is a mix of truth and exaggeration in this perception.

When discussing Afghanistan, it's vital to recall its past. Geography forms the cornerstone for the development of both security and foreign policy. Here, we heard opinions from people from KP and Balochistan. It's evident that there is a shared ethnicity, a common culture, and a common economic framework, which form the foundation of their identity and perspectives. However, security of the people is the most critical factor at stake.

The primary inquiries revolve around the role of the establishment in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, as well as the perspectives and roles of political parties. It is perplexing why party officials consistently seek recognition for their party's achievements. Everyone should unite around common goals, such as combating radicalization, ensuring economic stability, and promoting peaceful coexistence.

I have also visited Afghanistan and maintain regular communication with the people there. Afghans are incredibly resilient people; despite challenges, girls' education continues through secret schools and self-education using pamphlets and radio services. Moreover, the Taliban are now allowing some extent of female students to study medicine.

Most of the time we attribute the shortcomings of our Afghanistan strategy to Pakistan.

Statements have been made, expressing regret for aiding the Taliban in Afghanistan and for repatriating refugees.

Regarding the notion that the TTP is solely an internal issue, I believe that all these issues are interconnected. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that Pakistan's security apparatus or institutions are disconnected from reality. They often shape our perceptions, a tactic employed by establishments worldwide. We are concerned about forming our opinions because security agencies meticulously evaluate public sentiment. But the question of whose viewpoint holds the most significance is a separate matter.

It's not entirely accurate to attribute the PTI's inability to accomplish anything solely to General Bajwa or the establishment. It is a fact that PTI was close with the establishment. The current ruling parties are likewise influenced by the establishment.

Our belief in the real world should steer us away from idealism. Both the establishment and political parties adhere to a set of policies. The bottom line is that civilians should be at the center of policymaking for Pakistan and Afghanistan; otherwise, neither country would have peace.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Shabana Fayyaz. Now, I invite Dr. Jehanzeb Jamaldini to explain for us why the parliament has not been able to take over foreign policy from the establishment.

Dr. Jehanzeb Jamaldini, former Senator, Secretary-General of Balochistan National Party-Mengal

There are some complex situations and problems. In some of these problems, we have ourselves fallen due to our mistakes and omissions. Nobody is accepting the mistakes of the past to move ahead with clarity. The perception that the parliament holds significant policymaking power in Pakistan is misguided; while it may appear so overtly, true policymaking occurs elsewhere.

Enmity with India on the issue of Kashmir and water channels is understandable. Apart from this, a large population has emigrated from Pakistan to India and vice versa. There are Muslims in India, and India claims that it is the largest Muslim country. Although other countries have good relations with India, China also has reasonable relations with India. Despite maintaining diplomatic ties with numerous countries globally, Pakistan's stance towards India remains entrenched in historical animosity, hindering progress in trade and international cooperation. Despite China's counsel to prioritize trade over rivalry, Pakistan remains stagnant. Decades of conditioned rhetoric have impeded diplomatic flexibility and wasted valuable time. Strained relations with Afghanistan and lukewarm ties with Iran highlight the urgency of cultivating friendships. Failure to do so leaves Pakistan vulnerable to exploitation by adversaries, with India often scapegoated for domestic issues. Pakistan's strained relations extend beyond India, encompassing the US, Europe, and neighboring states, indicative of a faltering foreign policy framework. Parliamentary efforts to shape policy are routinely disregarded. Addressing the root cause of these shortcomings requires introspection.

While hope is placed in the new parliament, past experiences remind us of similar optimism that yielded little results. It's imperative to openly acknowledge past mistakes and commit to avoiding their repetition. I have friends among military leaders, who recognize grave errors as "blunders," underscore the need for a clear roadmap to progress. Pakistan's historical involvement in Afghanistan, from supporting the Taliban to subsequent regime changes, illustrates the complexities and consequences of foreign policy decisions. Overcoming the challenges of a troubled past to chart a coherent foreign policy direction requires collaboration among political parties. Unfortunately, party politics often hinder consensus-building efforts. Furthermore, the creation and manipulation of parties for short-term gains have eroded public trust and stifled dissent. Breaking free from such constraints and political maneuvers is essential for progress. Enslaved by rigid thinking, debates over trade with India exemplify the pervasive influence of ideological considerations over pragmatic solutions. Reiterating Pakistan's founding principles in the name of Islam serves little purpose if it hampers pragmatic decision-making. Embracing a forward-looking approach demands a break from the shackles of outdated ideologies and a willingness to pursue pragmatic solutions for the nation's betterment.

Despite having a constitution, its implementation remains elusive, and our ability to cultivate international relations is lacking. Afghanistan's evolving status underscores the urgency of improving bilateral ties. Addressing the TTP necessitates acknowledging its nexus with the Afghan Taliban, dispelling illusions of differentiation. Internal policy matters should take precedence, signaling the need for focused attention on domestic affairs before advancing foreign policy agendas.

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, is often a topic of discussion, yet its electoral process raises concerns. In the recent elections, it looks like seats were 'tendered and sold', highlighting systemic issues of corruption and exploitation. With Balochistan comprising 44% of Pakistan's landmass, the 'auctioning of seats' is a dire reflection of the state of democracy. The high price tags attached to these seats, reminiscent of Abdul Wali Khan's cynical remark about parliamentary seats being up for sale, underscore the urgent need for reform and accountability. Failing to address internal issues not only undermines democracy but also hampers the effectiveness of foreign policy efforts. As international scrutiny intensifies, a reasoned and proactive approach is imperative to counter negative perceptions and restore credibility.

Improving relations with Afghanistan is paramount. While Afghanistan faces challenges as a landlocked nation, it seeks opportunities for business and trade, which Pakistan should facilitate through reasonable and mutually beneficial relations. However, concerns arise as the Afghan Taliban's ambitions extend to territories like Balochistan, reflecting potential threats to Pakistan's sovereignty. Yet, there's a concerning silence among academics, journalists, and policymakers on this issue. Urgent discussions are needed to prioritize foreign and internal policy coherence, along with economic development. While importing economic expertise may offer solutions, previous capable individuals like Ishaq Dar and Miftah Ismail should not be discounted. The lack of open parliamentary discussions undermines effective policymaking, leading to lifeless foreign policies. It's imperative to ensure thorough debates and deliberations on critical issues

like the Gwadar situation to address public concerns and safeguard national interests.

That's why I say that the best way to solve issues of internal policy, foreign policy, and economy lies in letting the people think. They should have thorough discussions on these issues, only then can some way out be found.

We know that we are under pressure from the West. We are looking towards the East [China] because we are forced to do so. They [Chinese] could help us to some extent, but then we will come under their pressure. After getting under pressure, we accept whatever is said. I said this on the Senate floor that CPEC connects China to Gwadar, and they should consult some people from Balochistan who could give reasonable suggestions. Our army personnel are our brothers and friends. They have great authority and have presence in every department in some way. We need to ensure representation of common citizens in CPEC matters. Unfortunately, military personnel have been involved, leading to stagnation in CPEC progress. Our inability to assert ourselves in CPEC negotiations and stand firm against the US underscores the need for diversification in our trade relations. Resuming trade with India on reasonable terms could benefit Pakistan, given our current constraints. Strengthening ties with China is crucial, but our foreign policymakers must also assert our interests, whether through effective bargaining or by providing a robust response to Western pressures.

I appeal to our journalists, academicians, statesmen and common people to say openly that parliament should be completely made sovereign by making it the forum of making all big decisions. Chief Justice of Pakistan, Qazi Faez Esa, made a commendable statement expressing his faith in parliament, which deserves our respect. It's imperative for politicians, journalists, experts, military personnel, and all citizens to step up, boldly defend our nation, and contribute to its progress. Our love for this country must translate into actions that safeguard its interests and propel it forward.

One question, as Shahzada Zulfiqar noted, is: Why people of Balochistan are angry? If we recall, were not all so-called dissident Baloch people in parliament in the past? Were they not part of the process when the Constitution of 1973 was made? Those demanding independence now, were not senators or MPAs in the past? During a Senate session, I proposed the formation of a commission to investigate why once common parliamentarians of Balochistan have now become independence-lovers. This suggestion should have been acknowledged, especially considering my brother and former Chief Minister Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch's efforts to initiate reconciliation talks. It's crucial to address this entrenched mentality of opposition and negativity. Only by overcoming this "no" attitude can we engage in meaningful negotiations with dissident Baloch groups, ultimately leading to constructive dialogue and resolution.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Dr. Salma Malik, it's evident that the establishment's significant influence stems from the fact that many think tanks in Pakistan have predominantly aligned their policy recommendations with its objectives. Could you elaborate on this paradox?

Dr. Salma Malik, Associate Professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad

Think tanks were established with the intention of representing a specific institution. For instance, for the foreign office, the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), and for the information ministry, Institute of Regional Studies (IRS).

Despite being managed by military personnel or under direct or indirect military control, these institutions exhibited superior performance. These days, they are much more visible, but their capacity to formulate policies is diminished. I can confidently say this because of my experience of working for an organization where I started my career. It was a fantastic workplace with a great environment.

It is important for every institute to have a clear purpose and be flexible enough to contribute effectively to national policy. It is noteworthy that there are now privately held organizations outside the public sector that deliberate over critical security policy and other issues. Twenty or twenty-five years ago, this was not possible.

It's also important to have independent think tanks in the country, where experts can address parliament and offer their view fearlessly. When Mohsin Dawar was in charge of our foreign policy committee, I observed that he had instituted a procedure involving engagement with representatives of the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services to discuss various issues.

We have all the necessary elements to transition to a think tank structure. The only reason we hesitate to embrace it is that we doubt its efficacy for us. Our Parliament does not make foreign policy. Instructions come from external sources. Public ownership will remain elusive as long as policies are made and implemented incorrectly.

When legislators are well-informed and aware of the critical issues, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of a policy, it leads to a policy-making process that is truly owned by the people. However, when security is the sole focus, then every aspect, including issues concerning women, refugees, internally displaced people, and more, is viewed through a security lens.

We often highlight that the Taliban are restricting women's education, but there are also individuals in Pakistan who sympathize with such sentiments.

It is important to know that the primary puzzle in the realm of policy is linked to whether the establishment or relevant institutions are willing to diminish their influence if necessary. This raises the question: to what extent are they prepared to do so, and what are the potential consequences?

If we are to take steps regarding Afghanistan, it's important to identify problem areas first. Moreover, people to people connectivity between Pakistan and Afghanistan should be strengthened. It should be considered, as it's essential for us to collaborate across various policy think tanks and research institutions to effectively address our common issues.

There is a notable media disconnect between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with both countries blocking each other's channels. Meanwhile, all of India's channels are being broadcast in Afghanistan. Regardless of whether the establishment is at fault or not, civilian leadership has its own shortcomings as well. Because of these shortcomings we have failed to explore the entry points for improving bilateral relations confidently and sig-

nificantly. We have lost good opportunities of improving our relations.

Are the Indians genuinely interested in collaborating with us, or have they recently entered the discussion? Another thing to consider is who benefits from insecurity in the region. Those who benefits from insecurity will continue to thrive as long as the conflict persists. They will prevent peace from getting established in the region. Investigating this and giving it more thought is really necessary. No matter which policy, I believe that if we do a little bit of homework on it through the media and in the form of opinion generation, we can better understand the consequences of our decision and how to handle them. After all, policies are frequently not wrong, but the way they are implemented. There are a lot many issues to be considered.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Thanks Dr Salma, there are many lessons for us in your talk, and we can make things better and at least refine the thinking process and intellectual exercise to a great extent. I give floor to Afrasiab Khattak.

Afrasiab Khattak, political analyst and expert on Afghan affairs

We have always a considered opinion that there should be a critical analysis of Pakistan's Afghan policy, which does not happen here. The government line is that we were standing on the right side yesterday, are on the right side today and will remain so in future. And there is no room for rectification.

The instant challenge is that the Taliban have control over Afghanistan, but state failure continues. It means that no system could be established there, which has both internal and external legitimacy. It has implications for Pakistan though these are internal problems of Afghanistan and only Afghans have to make a system of governance in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has been fighting a war for 45 years in Afghanistan. But Pakistan itself has an ailing economy, the state is in a crisis, and its society is brutalized, extremist and a victim of overdose of religiosity. These are all our local problems, but their main source is our Afghan policy. For this reason, we cannot remain irrelevant to it, and we cannot find a solution to the crisis of Pakistan internally without rectifying our Afghan policy.

Since the disintegration of the USSR, world powers like the US quit Afghanistan after 20 years. There is a difference of opinion in the US on how they should have quit Afghanistan but there is no difference in quitting the country. Both Republicans and Democrats agree that they should have quit.

The biggest problem of Pakistan is that we are not ready to speak the truth to our people. We say that we did not go there. All Taliban leaders have been living here. The Haqqani brothers had been living here as their father had landed in Pakistan in 1974. But they say no one is here. And if someone asks them about Taliban, they say which Taliban, we don't know any Taliban. How will we make a course correction if we don't not acknowledge that Taliban had been living here?

General Naeem Khalid Lodhi talked about the system of governance in Afghanistan, Taliban had been running a parallel government in the neighboring country while living

here in Pakistan.

Had Afghan Taliban's supreme leader Hibatuallah Akhunzada not been living here in Kuchlak, Balochistan? All people know as it is an open secret. But if someone says, they say no and label it as a propaganda of India. We should come out of this denial mode.

Frankly, we should start from the fact that we fought a war for 45 years and cannot afford it anymore. Pakistan itself is a failing state. It is the sick man of South Asia keeping in view its poor economy. The only way out for Pakistan is to change its Afghan policy. It should say that the Taliban had been living here and went back to their country from here, but this was wrong and we should neither have done this nor it will happen in future. Then we can start a new journey.

There is no doubt that the interest of the West overwhelms Pakistan's policy. Pakistan's policy has remained an extension of western policy – SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization), CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), Afghan war, and jihad or whatever has been happening here.

The Chinese are concerned about Pakistan's stance amidst geopolitical tensions, particularly regarding the completion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Despite Pakistan's announcements, CPEC faces delays due to Western opposition, indicating a conflict of interests. Pakistan must make decisive choices, depending upon a representative government that genuinely reflects public aspirations and interests. However, entrenched civil and military ties with the West often overshadow Pakistan's independent policy pursuits, proving detrimental.

There's a discernible Western agenda to disrupt peace in Central Asia and hinder China's Belt and Road Initiative, potentially instigating conflicts. Pakistan must prioritize its interests without antagonizing the West, advocating for normal relations. Amidst domestic turmoil, the government faces legitimacy issues stemming from electoral controversies, largely influenced by institutional rigging rather than political rivalries.

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan, particularly with the Taliban, requires recalibration. While the Taliban are viewed favorably by Pakistan, addressing non-Taliban Afghans' concerns is crucial to dispel perceptions of enmity. Many Afghans consider Pakistan complicit in their ongoing conflict, necessitating a nuanced diplomatic approach to foster understanding and peace.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Ambassador Durrani, what is the policy of Pakistan towards Afghanistan, what is the response of Afghan Taliban? What is the approach and commitment of Pakistan for non-Taliban Pashtuns? What is Pakistan doing for them?

Asif Ali Khan Durrani, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan

When discussing Afghanistan, it's crucial to reflect on its historical context. Apart from the relatively peaceful 40-year reign of Zahir Shah, Afghanistan has endured persistent conflict for the past 45 years. Without internal unity among Afghans, external interventions risk exacerbating rather than resolving the country's challenges.

The first question is what is the political leaning of the Afghan Taliban? I will call banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Afghan Taliban as ideological cousins, there is no difference between them and they are one.

Here, we had an ideological fault line, in which the religious groups have had their own role. It is a separate thing whether they were allowed or imposed on the country. We all know where we stand and what has been the nature of polity and politics here, historically.

Foreign policy often mirrors a nation's domestic structure. Furthermore, if you do not have economic strength your foreign policy becomes weak and ineffective. Take Qatar, for instance, which is a country of 250,000 people and the remaining 2.5 million are there to serve them and it is functioning with remarkable efficacy. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a country of 0.8 million people and 8 million are there to serve it and it is functioning beyond its way. Their robust economies reinforce their foreign policy endeavors, enabling them to wield influence into African crises like Sudan and Somalia.

When discussing Afghanistan, it's essential to recognize the unique symbiotic relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, unlike Afghanistan's interactions with its other neighbors. Among Afghanistan's six neighbors, only Pakistan shares this depth of commonality and symbiosis. This is evident in the daily movement of 30,000 to 35,000 Afghans across the Pak-Afghan border, a facilitation not extended to Afghans by Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, or China.

Regarding the deportation issue, the responsibility lies with our law enforcement agencies to not allow individuals to enter the country without valid papers. Across the globe, ensuring compliance with immigration laws is a continuous 24/7 operation. For instance, in London, individuals without visas or staying on fake documents are promptly detained and deported. Pakistan should maintain a vigilant round-the-clock operation to address such issues, negating the need for a specific campaign targeting Afghan deportations.

Regarding transit trade, there's a prevailing issue of laxity and corruption within our system, enabling smuggling to thrive. Suspending transit trade to Afghanistan due to suspicions of over-importation necessitates scrutiny of neighboring countries' enforcement measures, which effectively curb smuggling. Despite restrictions on certain exports from Afghanistan to Pakistan, these items still enter via Iran, rendering the policy ineffective. Addressing these policy flaws is imperative, regardless of changes in government. Afghanistan, historically a trading nation, faces limitations as a landlocked country. The shift from extensive trade routes pre-partition to the restricted Wagah Border access has fueled grievances. However, hindering trade not only impacts Afghanistan but also detrimentally affects Pakistan's interests.

Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan increased up to \$ 450 million last year from \$ 55 million in 2020 and is growing further but if you put hurdles on transit trade, then it will stop.

We should not have illusions that we have leverage over Afghanistan. I have been saying this at every forum and with all stakeholders that this will not happen if you think.

There is peace in Afghanistan, politically. Corruption is on the decrease under the Taliban rule as compared to previous governments. The Taliban have effectively boosted

revenue and curtailed poppy cultivation, earning international recognition, including from the UNODC. However, their actions regarding human rights, such as the ban on girls' secondary education and employment, raise significant concerns. While these decisions may align with Afghan traditions to some extent, they contradict Islamic principles when viewed from a broader perspective.

This is precisely why the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has unequivocally condemned the ban on women's education and employment rights, demanding its immediate lifting. From my interactions, it appears that 90 percent of the Taliban leadership opposes this edict, citing a sense of helplessness in effecting change. However, there's a potential solution through invoking *ijmaa* (consensus of the Muslim community on Islamic law). People could approach Mullah Hibatuallah to convene an *ijmaa* and gauge public opinion, given the overwhelming majority's opposition to the edict. While there's a possibility, uncertainty looms over whether this will materialize.

The Taliban's governance model remains ambiguous. When questioned about their intended constitution, they often cite the Quran without offering specifics on implementation. Crucially, they must outline their plans for key institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and articulate their approach to domestic policy and safeguarding people's rights. Their economic policies operate under outdated systems, compounded by a lack of clarity and the presence of only a few technocrats, leading to persistent challenges.

They are facing a financial loss because the US has frozen their accounts worth \$ 9.6 billion, out of which \$ 7 billion are with Americans, and the remaining amount is with other countries. At the same time, Afghan banks cannot do normal business and resultantly, the poverty graph in Afghanistan is at 97 percent while over 50 percent people are living below poverty – a situation that should be a cause of concern for Pakistan. If the situation deteriorates there, Pakistan is the first favorite destination for Afghans to migrate. Islamabad should have emergency and contingency plans to deal with this. Secondly, the UN is dealing with its humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan through cash because the banking system is not working there. This shows the double-faced policy of the international community, especially Americans and Europeans.

On one side, they talk about FATF (Financial Action Task Force) asking for the implementation of anti-money laundering laws; on the other side they themselves are giving away cash to Afghanistan. No one knows how long this method will work. Their argument is that Afghanistan doesn't have capacity, but my view is their banks are working, they have training, and they are dealing with the rest of the world. These are only excuses.

At the regional level, Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, along with Russia, have provided crucial support to Afghanistan through bilateral trade, primarily facilitated by currency swaps and barter systems. This sustenance operates at a tangible, substantive level. Despite economic challenges, people in Afghanistan are not fleeing the country in large numbers, indicating a degree of stability. Much credit is owed to Russia and its neighboring countries for this support and stability.

Pakistan had given a transit route to India to export 50,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan. It exported some of its quantity and then stopped the trade as it wanted to promote Chabahar Port. In the context of India and Afghanistan, it suits India to open a second front for Pakistan through Afghanistan and it has done so. The proscribed TTP is

getting money through Afghan proxies right now.

Approximately, TTP had 5,000 to 6,000 cadres taking shelter in Afghanistan. If we include their families, then the number goes up to 70,000. The Afghan Taliban cannot afford the per-day expenditure of 70,000 people, which means that someone else is paying for their upkeep.

Even the TTP does not know that this funding is coming from India. There are Afghan proxies which were already there, and the handling is done through Gulf States. India is subsidizing trade and the Indian government is paying $\frac{3}{4}$ the airfare of cargo on import of dry fruit and export of medicines for Afghanistan. India has always had a soft power in Afghanistan, and it wants to maintain this image in the context of a war-torn country. But once they have established their foothold, then they use the soil of Afghanistan against Pakistan. Naturally when you have an adversarial relationship, you will do this in a very cheap way as India is spending 35 billion India rupee to keep Pakistan busy.

In the context of TTP, Pakistan's peace talks with the banned group failed because they were neither ready to surrender nor do they owe allegiance to the Constitution of Pakistan.

The third primary reason for the deadlock in talks was that they were not ready to face the law for the heinous crimes they committed, including the attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar in which around 150 children were massacred. Who will forgive them? Whether the state of Pakistan has the authority to give them an amnesty?

I had raised this question with the Taliban during talks and asked them that you don't allow anyone to carry arms in your country but how and why TTP cadres are carrying arms. What immediately they have to do is make them surrender and disarm the group and detain its leadership if they mean some business. If not, then TTP is the red line for Pakistan.

But all is not bad. We are still Afghanistan's largest trading partner. One document regime for travelling is successfully functioning at Pak-Afghan border in Torkham for the last eight years. There is a problem at Chaman crossing but there is a need to give some more time and relaxation to the people. Ultimately it will be implemented.

Traditionally and historically, we cannot ban entry and exit on the Afghan border. But if you want to enforce one document regime in the form of a passport, then you will have to introduce a visa on arrival facility as an alternative. The discussion on this option is under way and it is still premature how you are progressing on this.

In education, Pakistan has offered 4,500 scholarships, including 1500 exclusively for girls, in the third phase. Pakistan is running three hospitals in Afghanistan and Torkham-Jalalabad road is in the last leg of its completion, only 20 percent work is pending. Pakistan-sponsored all three hospitals – one is Jinnah Hospital in Kabul, other is in Logar Province and third one is a kidney center in Jalalabad – are functional. The engineering faculty of a university in Mazar-i-Sharif, developed by Pakistan, is up and running. Pakistan also developed the arts faculty of Kabul University. We constructed schools for them. Pakistan-funded 14 mobile medical units were even functional during 2006-7 when I was deputy head of mission in Afghanistan. The overall package of Pakistan for Afghanistan since 2004 onward is approximately \$ 1 billion and we are still doing that.

All is not bad. Sometimes the media creates hype that relations between two countries are very bad. We are in touch on a daily basis, but issues remain. On one issue, for example, what will you say to the Afghan government when TTP are taking shelter, they are roaming around there with their weapons. These are the challenges.

The regional approach is that China for all practical purposes has not recognized Afghanistan formally, but they have started a working relationship with it. This is like a couple is living with consent without marriage.

Russia has not done this, but they are pleading their case at Doha. Iran has problems with Afghanistan especially on the water issue on the Helmand River, but it is siding with its neighbor. Pakistan is part of a coalition aligned with the Moscow format, which includes Russia, China, India, and Afghanistan's other immediate neighbors. The United States was previously involved but withdrew in 2022.

At international level, Afghanistan is on the least priority of the US and West because of the Ukraine and Israel wars.

Regarding inclusivity and non-Afghan stakeholders, it's crucial to recall the Doha Agreement signed by the Americans with the Taliban. One provision entailed dialogue with other parties, including Ashraf Ghani and all relevant stakeholders. However, the Taliban took seven months to form a delegation due to internal differences, resulting in a delegation of 21 members, including three Taliban representatives. Their lack of cohesion persists, with disparate groups now holding discussions in Ankara, Vienna, and Washington. Without a genuine desire for resolution from all parties, external actors will continue to exploit the situation to their advantage. For now, a comforting factor is that Afghanistan's immediate neighbors are refraining from playing favorites within the country. Iran is preoccupied with Middle Eastern politics and has maintained a neutral stance, not overtly supporting Hazara and Shia factions. Tajikistan has provided refuge to the son of Ahmad Shah Masood, who heads the National Resistance Front. However, Russia has cautioned Tajikistan against interference, emphasizing the potential serious consequences.

Pakistan, China and Afghanistan have a trilateral forum and all three foreign ministers had met in Islamabad last May where Afghan Taliban had committed themselves to take action against the TTP, but they have not honored the commitment so far. Afghan Taliban have their own problems. They are facing the threat of Islamic State, and Pakistan is also facing the same threat. The militant group conducted attacks in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran and killed 100 people on the death anniversary of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani.

We are also sensitizing internationally that the problem will not remain limited to the region, and the militants are going to knock your shores if they get an opportunity.

We should not expect miracles and it is enough if there is normalcy in Afghanistan. The question is what we should do? We have to deal with Afghanistan. There is no need to baptize them. There is no need to patronize them because Afghans are astute diplomats, and they got the Doha agreement after negotiating with the US for 10 years. At the same time, they have been fighting war during this time and they had a famous saying in their ranks that "Americans may have the watch, but we have the time." This is a very deep thing, and we should not underestimate them.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

Ambassador Durrani emphasized that dialogue with the TTP was a failure. Former caretaker PM Anwaarul Haq Kakar reiterated this stance numerous times including on this forum, advocating against negotiations with militants. He has openly stated on record that intermediary forces should be eliminated, allowing the state to effectively confront such threats.

Asif Durrani

I don't subscribe to Kakar's views because Afghan Taliban are also involved in TTP issue. Baloch dissidents and militancy operate independently without the involvement of third countries. Therefore, engaging in talks with them is a separate matter, and I fully support it. However, the TTP issue involves a foreign country's interference, and it's crucial to make this distinction.

Muhammad Amir Rana (Moderator)

We ask this basic question from Dr Baloch, from where this mindset came? Will this approach work in future because Chief Minister Balochistan Sarfraz Ahmed Bugti and Kakar are very close to each other?

Dr Abdul Malik Baloch, former chief minister Balochistan and President National Party

The crux of Pakistan's solutions, whether economic, political, or foreign policy-related, lies within the parliament. Over the past four decades, I've collaborated with major political parties—Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and even Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)—but unfortunately, all have been compromised. During the formation of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition of political parties, I represented my party in drafting a manifesto consisting of 25 points, all geared towards serving the people's interests. However, compromises were made on certain issues.

I can speak for Balochistan, where elections weren't conducted this time, but actions were taken. Those who invested more money secured their positions in the assemblies. Frankly, dealing with a sensitive region like Balochistan, which comprises half of Pakistan geographically, solely through a security lens rather than a political one, will never yield positive outcomes. I've conveyed to the responsible authorities in Pakistan that they only focus on the province's 16 seats in the National Assembly without recognizing its significance. Unfortunately, our establishment predominantly views the province through a security prism.

Senior army officers say that this insurgency could not be controlled even if we increase the deployment of Frontier Corps (FC) up to 100 percent. As long as there will be no real representation of people in Balochistan, the issues of the province will not get resolved.

In 2008, we were warned that aligning with Nawaz Sharif would result in our elimination from the election. However, following the election, we were called for a meeting by the powers-that-be who acknowledged the injustice done to us and assured it wouldn't happen again. Sadly, the recent election surpassed all previous ones in terms of irregu-

larities.

Even before the election, I sought assurance from powerful quarters about our safety. Despite their assurances, we faced victimization, compounded by attacks from the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). According to a district police officer's report, Turbat district in Balochistan witnessed 107 terrorist attacks on February 7 and 8 alone. Despite these challenges, not a single one of our election candidates remained unattacked, although they were protected by divine intervention.

Conflict often manifests in economic repercussions. In five districts of Balochistan—Gwadar, Kech, Panjgur, Washuk, and Chagai—illegal drug and oil businesses worth millions of rupees occur every night, with administration and security officials involved.

We are facing a difficult situation. People receive threatening phone calls demanding favors or votes for specific candidates. Those who resist are falsely accused of aligning with groups like the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) or Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). It's unfortunate to admit, but it's widely recognized that the majority of the Balochistan Assembly, with a few exceptions, comprises individuals either associated with the drug mafia or contractors who purchased seats through auctions ranging from Rs 300 million to one billion rupees. While it's not appropriate to single out individuals, this situation raises serious concerns about governance in Balochistan. Ministries are now being sold, and there's a fear that valuable departments will be next. While I can't speak for other provinces, Balochistan has unfortunately been perceived as spoils (*maal-eghaneemat*).

During my interactions, I have told senior government functionaries both in Balochistan and at the center that this strategy will ruin Pakistan. Disturbingly, in district Barkhan, six individuals with M.Phil degrees joined the BLF. Additionally, in the Mach terror attack, all 12 attackers were well-educated, with five hailing from Turbat and two each from Panjgur, Gwadar, and Quetta. Despite these alarming realities, if the response remains "all is well," then continuing to govern in this manner will only exacerbate the situation.

The pillars of any state—parliament, judiciary, security institutions, bureaucracy, and media—are vital for its functioning. However, rampant corruption within these institutions has reached unimaginable levels. History has shown that civilizations, from the Romans to the Mughals and Russia, have collapsed primarily due to internal corruption rather than external forces.

In Balochistan, assembly seats were essentially up for auction. I personally lost the NA election to a candidate from Nimruz, Afghanistan. Astonishingly, his son and son-in-law won seats in Quetta, despite having no familiarity with the streets of Sariab, a prominent area in the provincial capital. Additionally, seats previously held by the Hazara community, won by either democrats or religious parties, have now been distributed among candidates of Baloch and Pashtun backgrounds.

As someone committed to the principles of federalism, democracy, and allegiance to the Constitution, it has become increasingly challenging for me as the president of my party to rally support for our democratic cause. Disheartened workers express frustration, feeling that their efforts over the past five years have been in vain, as those who won have little connection to the public or demonstrated any meaningful groundwork. Continuing to uphold our narrative of democracy in the face of such disillusionment is prov-

ing to be an uphill battle.

I express these sentiments with utmost seriousness, as I have done in the past, yet unfortunately, our voices have fallen on deaf ears and I anticipate they will continue to do so in the future. We have tirelessly advocated for these recommendations, discussing them in the Senate and emphasizing the need to trust the people of Balochistan if we aim to improve the province's situation.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif championed the slogan "respect the vote," while we advocated for "giving the right to vote." We have faced struggles reminiscent of historical injustices when slaves and women were denied voting rights, and we find ourselves in a similar position now. Securing the right to vote must be our primary objective before democracy can truly be realized.

Regrettably, all parties within the PDM, including ourselves, who have long fought for democracy, have committed a grave injustice to the people by compromising our principles. It appears that no legislation will pass in the national and Balochistan assemblies unless it aligns with the interests of the powerful establishment. Reconciliation efforts in Balochistan are bound to fail as all stakeholders benefit from the unrest in the province. Despite this understanding, our establishment has chosen to overlook this critical factor.

Tahir Khan

I have a question for Ambassador Durrani. Could you provide insight into Pakistan's current relations with the US, Saudi Arabia, and other countries regarding Afghanistan? In the past, China consulted Pakistan before engaging with Afghanistan, but it seems this dynamic may have shifted. What are Pakistan's current relations with Central Asia, Iran, the US, and China concerning Afghanistan?

Asif Durrani

Pakistan's problem with Afghanistan is TTP, otherwise it has no issue with the neighboring country. Even the rest of the world has no issue with it. So why should the other world consult Pakistan on the issue?

Afghanistan is on the least priority of the US and my US counterpart in a meeting with me has admitted this. Saudi Arabia has no priorities in Afghanistan like it had during the times of Soviet-Afghan War. Read the book 'Afghanistan File' written by Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud as these things have been clearly stated in it. The question is wrong that Pakistan was asked earlier and not now. This time Afghanistan's file is cooling down and it was not their priority so what should they discuss with Pakistan?

Riffatullah Orakzai

It apparently looks that terror incidents in Pakistan have decreased after Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman's visit to Afghanistan. From December- onward, no major incident has occurred. Whether some talks are underway or some understanding has been reached? What is the matter?

Asif Durrani

Our Afghan counterparts have assured us that we will witness a noticeable decrease in terror attacks as summer approaches. While this process is ongoing, we will only believe it when we see concrete evidence.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman is part of the equation, he visited but this is power play. The Taliban are in power and they have not heard their teachers' advice on women's education and their right to work. In power, the father doesn't recognize son and vice versa. We should not forget these dynamics.

Dr Qibla Ayaz, Chairman Council of Islamic Ideology

We've engaged with Afghanistan and the Taliban through the OIC platform, particularly focusing on girls' education, which is of utmost importance. Over the past two years, we've interacted with second-tier leadership within the Afghan Taliban, spanning various backgrounds from Pashtun to non-Pashtun, including individuals from Balkh, Helmand, Paktika, Paktia, and Khost. Recently, we held extensive discussions with two prominent leaders, former Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan Abdul Hakim Mujahid, and Afghan scholar Abdul Wahid Wahid.

Our interactions have revealed that Afghans struggle with embracing institutionalism. Historically, institutionalism has not been as robust in Afghanistan as in other countries. Even during the reign of Zahir Shah, while a functional system existed, institutionalism remained weak in remote areas. Both former presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, particularly the latter who received education in the West, made significant efforts to promote institutionalism in Afghanistan, achieving considerable success in this regard.

We've observed a decline in institutionalism within the ranks of the Taliban, with individual decisions taking precedence. For instance, they mentioned in Pashto that while previously there were limited capacities for enforcing laws, laws did exist. However, now there is capacity but no corresponding laws. From well-informed sources, we've learned that the Taliban view allowing girls' education under pressure from the international community as a defeat for Pashtun culture. They assert that they are unwilling to enter paradise under coercion.

Regarding Ambassador Durrani's proposal of *ijmaa*, around 3,000 ulema were set to convene a jirga in Afghanistan. However, upon learning about it, Amirul Momineen sought details and instructed to remove the item of girls' education from the agenda. Thus, the *ijmaa* can only proceed when Hibatullah is willing to accept it or permit its occurrence. Currently, he is not inclined to do so.

The Taliban's chief advisor on legal constitutional jurisprudence is Abdul Hakim Haqqani, who also serves as the chief justice of Afghanistan. He authored a book titled "Al-Nazim Ul Sharia wa Nifaza-o-Ha," which provides guidelines for issuing and enforcing Sharia law. This book holds a significant status similar to how Al-Qaeda's "Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara" was regarded as a bible. However, the book contains numerous ambiguities, particularly regarding the appointment and powers of the shura. Even their chief advisor and chief justice, with authority to enforce the system, grapples with these confusions.

In Afghanistan, the situation and feelings are intense about Pakistan. I have an under-

standing that Afghanistan is still without peace but there is a sort of order in the country.

The poverty visible on the streets of Kabul is stark, surpassing anything witnessed during the administrations of Ashraf Ghani and Hamid Karzai. The level of poverty observed over the last five months is unprecedented, evident from the condition of people's clothing, shoes, faces, and burqas.

I believe it's a deliberate policy of the Afghan Taliban to designate Pakistan as their enemy and propagate this slogan to divert attention away from the system they are implementing, which may lead to further impoverishment. If they persist in this obstinacy, the international community may hesitate to engage with them at a level that could improve the living standards of the Afghan people. If conditions worsen, the possibility of internal unrest against the Taliban cannot be discounted, although it may not occur immediately.

During our visit to Afghanistan, our 25-member delegation from the OIC, which included esteemed scholars from Turkey, Jordan, Abu Dhabi, and the Imam of Haram Sharif, was accompanied by Prof. Koutoub Moustapha Sano, the Secretary-General of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA). Among the Taliban leaders we met was the renowned Abdul Hameed Hamasi, along with other notable figures.

In a meeting with Afghan foreign minister, who delivered a passionate speech in Arabic, we were hailed as "ghazi, mujahid, and conqueror." Another significant encounter was with Farid-ud-Din Mahmood, Chairman of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan. Despite our expectations of a scholarly exchange, Mahmood bluntly dismissed our agenda on women's education, labeling it as a Western imposition, and swiftly ended the meeting.

This atmosphere reflects a staunch resistance to girls' education, as validated by Amirul Momineen's unwavering stance against it. He argues that providing education to women would lead to romantic correspondence, a notion he believes contradicts traditional folk tales. Despite our efforts, convincing them otherwise seems futile.

I extend my gratitude to PIPS and all participants for their contributions to our comprehensive and fruitful discussions