

# PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS DURING ASHRAF GHANI'S TENURE

by Faiza Maqsood

## RESEARCH BRIEFS



Pakistan and Afghanistan, although being neighboring countries, have had an uneasy relationship of mistrust and disaccord. Chances of improved relations took birth in September 2014 when Ashraf Ghani assumed the office of Afghanistan President. President Ashraf Ghani showed his strong commitment to friendly relations between two countries. Prior to becoming the President, he was of the view that the level of co-operation between Pakistan and Afghanistan should be similar to France-Germany relations after the Second World War.[1]

In order to normalize ties with Afghanistan, Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain attended the oath taking ceremony of Mr. Ashraf Ghani. This was the first step for normalization of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

During Ghani's visit to Pakistan in November 2014, President Ghani guaranteed close ties and strong bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[2] Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain assured that close cooperative relations with Afghanistan, based on mutual respect and trust, remain a high priority in Pakistan's foreign policy. Ghani also expressed his government's interest in "bolstering security and defense ties with Pakistan, including cooperation in training and border management".

On December 16, 2014, a terrorist attack on Army Public School (APS) Peshawar resulted in the death of 150 people including 132 children. This tragic incident brought the two neighbors closer to each other in their fight against terrorism.

Following the APS massacre, Army Chief Raheel Sharif and DG Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) Lt Gen Rizwan Akhtar visited Kabul to share intelligence details with Afghan officials regarding the masterminds of the APS attack who were residing in Afghanistan.[3] During his visit, Raheel Sharif also asked for the help of Afghan authorities to expel

TTP Chief Mullah Fazalullah.

On 22nd December 2014, Afghan forces launched an operation in the areas hosting TTP terrorists.[4] The next day, commanders of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan visited Pakistan and reaffirmed their commitment for the elimination of terror sanctuaries on Afghan soil.[5]

On 29th December 2014, a 16-member delegation of Afghan parliamentarians visited Islamabad and met Pakistani officials including Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.[6] Both sides showed their commitment to root out terrorism and increased bilateral cooperation on various issues.

In the second week of January 2015, DG ISI visited Afghanistan and met Afghan President and then Chief of National Directorate of Security (NDS) Rahmatullah Nabil. The reason of DG ISI's visit to Afghanistan was intelligence sharing. On the basis of intelligence information provided shared by DG ISI during his visit, Afghan forces launched operation and arrested five perpetrators of APS attack.[7]

The improvement in relations resulted in an unprecedented increase of military to military contacts between both nations. Six Afghan cadets were sent to Pakistan to receive training from Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) Kakul.[8]

In February, Raheel Sharif visited Afghanistan along with DG ISI. During Army Chief's interaction with Afghan civil and military leadership, both sides pledged to support each other in the fight against terror and not to allow the use of their own respective soil against each other.[9] Army Chief also declared that Afghanistan's enemy is Pakistan's enemy.

Nawaz Sharif visited Afghanistan along Raheel Sharif and DG ISI in May 2015. During the visit to Afghanistan, Nawaz denounced Afghan Taliban and said that future attacks by the group will be interpreted as terror attacks.[10] A week later, ISI and NDS signed a landmark deal for co-operation in counter-terrorism operations.

Following the attack on Afghan Parliament in June 2015, Afghan intelligence agencies blamed the attack was carried out by Haqqani network in assistance with an ISI officer.[11] Pakistan strongly condemned the attack on Afghan parliament attack. In the aftermath of the Parliament attack, the Pak-Afghan relations reached their lowest ebb. Afghanistan demanded a tough reaction from Pakistan against terrorists. Both President Ghani and Afghan Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to terrorists.

In July, peace talks between Afghan Government and Afghan Taliban were initiated after consistent efforts by Pakistan, which gave a new hope of settling of issues between Afghan Government and Afghan Taliban.[12] The US and Chinese officials attended the peace talks as observers. The initial peace talks were regarded as a major breakthrough for building confidence between both parties. The talks came after several informal contacts between the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government representatives in Qatar and Norway.[13] Pakistani Foreign office informed that the talks were held in a cordial and positive atmosphere, and that that the two sides had agreed upon meeting again after the month of Ramadan.

On the other hand, the effort of the Pakistan was acknowledged by Western officials. Afghan Government also appreciated Pakistan's efforts behind these peace negotiations. The second round of peace talks was cancelled following the revelation of the death of Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Omar.[14]

In November, Nawaz Sharif met President Ghani at the sidelines of the Paris Climate Change Conference.[15] Sharif briefed Ghani about operation Zarb-e-Azb and said it is continuing also against those who resorted to violence against Afghanistan. Prime Minister Sharif invited the

Afghan president to visit Pakistan to attend the Heart of Asia Conference. Reciprocating the sentiments, the Afghan president expressed the resolve to work with Pakistan and develop peaceful relations.

President Ghani visited Pakistan to attend the fifth Heart of Asia Conference in December. It was a major development towards improving ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[16] A quadrilateral framework was announced at the sidelines of the Heart of Asia Conference, involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States. The conference gave both Pakistan and Afghanistan a real opportunity to work out their differences and negotiate a settlement.

Following the Heart of Asia conference, Raheel Sharif visited Afghanistan.[17] During his visit, the decision about the next steps towards the revival of the Afghan peace talks was taken. Apart from discussing the revival of Afghan peace talks, discussions on the border management and other security matters dominated his talks with Afghan civil and military leadership.[18]

During the Army chief's visit to Afghanistan, it was agreed to re-start military to military engagement process. It was also decided that corps commanders from both sides will meet to discuss about better border management. Both countries have also established a hotline between military operations chiefs of both countries.[19]

The Quadrilateral Coordination Group, decided during Heart of Asia conference, met for the first time in Islamabad on 11th January 2016.[20] The meeting was aimed at bringing the Afghan Taliban on negotiating table again in order to end a decade long war in Afghanistan. Participation of President Ashraf Ghani in Heart of Asia and revival of peace talks between Afghan authorities and Afghan Taliban faded away the doubts between two countries.

The second meeting of four countries in the context of Afghan peace talks was held in Kabul on 18th January 2016.[21] The group of four countries met for the third time in Islamabad on 6th February. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group is due to meet again on 23rd February in Kabul.[22]

Following the Bacha Khan University attack on 20th January, Pakistan shared credible evidence with Afghan authorities that a faction of TTP directed the attack from Afghanistan.[23] The evidence includes the location from the where the call was made and the mobile phone number used.

Furthermore, Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif called Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and the top US and NATO commander in Afghanistan Gen John Campbell to inform them about evidence emerged from the initial investigation. The Army Chief asked the officials to co-operate in bringing to justice the mastermind, planners and handlers of the BKU attack.

However, Afghan interior ministry's spokesman Sediq Seddiqi dismissed the allegations about the presence of terrorist bases in Afghanistan being used against Pakistan.[24] He also denied that TTP had sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Apart from the revival of Afghan peace talks, military to military contacts between both nations has also increased. On 13th January, Pakistani DGMO Maj Gen Sahir Shamsad Mirza travelled to Kabul to meet his Afghan counterpart. Both military officials discussed ways to improve coordination for effective border management.[25]

On 30th January, an eight member delegation of Afghan National Army (ANA) visited Corps Headquarters Peshawar. Delegates from both sides discussed security arrangements at Pak-Afghan border.[26]

On 4th February, intelligence chiefs of both countries met in Pakistan. The meeting between both intelligence chiefs was the first high-level meeting between both intelligence agencies since the signing of the landmark deal between NDS and ISI in May last year. Both intelligence chiefs vowed to stop the use of their territory for terror designs against each other.

Meanwhile, military operation chiefs of both countries also met to discuss security and border management. The two sides also agreed to continue the interaction to enhance bilateral military cooperation.[27]

On 17th February, a nine-member delegation of ANA visited Pakistan to discuss border security issues.[28]

Meanwhile, Pakistan has recently announced the launch of \$500 million worth of projects for Afghanistan's education, health and infrastructure sectors. It was also announced that 100 Afghan students would study in the Lahore University of Management Sciences, one of the top universities of Pakistan.[29]

With the sincere efforts of Pakistan, peace talks are running smoothly and there are hopes of a settlement that will ensure long lasting peace in Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan will ensure stability and prosperity of both countries in particular and the region in general.

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