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Post-Ceasefire Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan

Author: Maryam Raashed*

Key Points:

- For Pakistan, Afghanistan as a peaceful neighbour presents the prospects of regional connectivity and bilateral economic partnership, delineating economic and political dividends for both Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Pakistan needs to exert a consistent yet measured pressure on the Afghan Taliban to commit to human security and develop a conciliatory outlook with the Afghan government.
- Islamabad ought to forgo its historical security-centric approach. Bilateral trade can serve as a suitable premise for establishing a working relationship with the politically negotiated Kabul government.
- Pakistan may face several challenges in Afghanistan, including cross-border terrorism, decreasing market share in Afghanistan, and the Islamic State's presence there. Also, refugees' repatriation and Pakistan's proxy warfare with India are crucial issues.
- Considering the linguistic and cultural similarity between Pakistan and several Afghan ethnicities, Pakistan can initiate research and development projects based on primary resources.
- Despite Pakistan's active contribution in the Afghan peacemaking process, a long-term engagement with Afghanistan hinges on Islamabad's peacebuilding efforts there.

INTRODUCTION

Located at the geopolitical boundaries of Pakistan, Afghanistan has consistently remained among the prime foreign policy issues of Pakistan. Most recently, the emergence of the prospects of a ceasefire between the warring factions of Afghanistan have come to the fore with the United States (U.S.)-led Afghan peace process coming to a mutually agreeable solution in February 2020. While Pakistan has played a key role in facilitating the U.S.-Afghan peace process, yet this is not the only initiative. Prior to this, Pakistan had also facilitated the Murree Peace Process, the Quadrilateral

Coordination Group Talks, and the Six Nations Talks.¹ Nevertheless, with its geoeconomic and geostrategic interests implicated in the stability of Afghanistan, Pakistan looks forward to establish a fairly workable relationship with Afghanistan.

Amid the probability of a ceasefire between the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban, it is pertinent for Pakistan to explore the challenges and opportunities, that may emerge for Pakistan. In this regard, this perspective paper seeks to analyse the current situation prevailing in Afghanistan with reference to an intra-Afghanistan dialogue. The paper further studies the prospects of an intra-afghan settlement and the possible positive externalities that Pakistan may seek

* Maryam Raashed is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research. She is a graduate of International Relations from National Defence University, Islamabad.

¹ Amina Khan, "Prospects of Peace in Afghanistan", *Strategic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2016):18-46

to haul. Next, the study presents a detailed view of the challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. Lastly, this paper seeks to devise a way forward for furthering its relations with Afghanistan in the current geo-political scenario.

CURRENT SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

In process since the past two years, the most recent development in the Afghan peace process took place on December 2, 2020, with the announcement of the finalisation of the modalities of intra-Afghan peace talks by an Afghan government representative.² The intra-Afghan talks had already begun in September 2020, following the signing of a joint declaration between the Afghan Taliban and U.S. in February, the process however, had experienced a setback owing to relevant parties' differences over the modalities of the peace talks.³ Nevertheless, as of now, both parties are displaying their intent on devising a mutually agreeable governance mechanism for a stable future of the country.

Stakes for both parties remain high for the intra-Afghan negotiations. The Afghan Taliban has emerged as a strong contender with power in Afghanistan. It controls wide swathes of Afghan territory, and manifested itself as a rigid and emboldened negotiator during the Afghan peace talks with the U.S. On the other hand, while the Afghan government is internationally recognised as a legitimate body ruling over the country, yet domestically, it is weak with limited territorial control over the country. With the Afghan Taliban emerging stronger than ever, in latest 2019 presidential election, the country registered the lowest voter turn-out since the last three presidential elections.⁴ Hence, for the Afghan government to retain its relevance to the emerging political scenario, and to avoid a potential relapse of Afghanistan into the hands of the Taliban exclusively, the intra-Afghan peace talks is an unwelcomed, yet the only choice.

Apart from the indigenous Afghan stake-holders, Pakistan and China are also displaying optimism towards the Afghan peace process. Islamabad and Beijing see a politically and strategically stable Afghanistan, as a peaceful neighbourhood, promising to be a driver of regional stability and connectivity,

² Diaa Hadid, "Afghan Government And Taliban Reach Breakthrough To Proceed With Peace Talks", *NPR*, last modified: December 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/02/941377066/afghan-government-and-taliban-reach-breakthrough-to-restart-peace-talks>

³ Sayed Salahuddin, "'No deadlock': Afghan officials deny talks impasse on one-month anniversary", *Arab News*, last modified October 12, 2020, <https://arab.news/rh4rg>

⁴ Mujib Mashal, Najim Rahim and Fatima Faizi, "Ghani Named Afghan Election Winner. His Opponent Claims Victory, Too", *The New York Times*, last modified February 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/world/asia/afghanistan-election-ashraf-ghani.html>

under the Belt and Road Initiative. Islamabad also views Afghanistan's stability as a pretext to mitigating the threat of terrorism, specifically emanating from Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State – Khorasan chapter in the country.⁵ China, on the other hand also views political stability in Afghanistan as a means to curb Uighur militancy emerging from groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, or Turkistan Islamic Movement.⁶

As for the U.S. while the Trump administration's push to achieve a quick withdrawal was appreciated by the Afghan Taliban, however the U.S. Afghanistan policy is expected to undergo if not complete, then at least some re-orientation as the Biden administration comes into power. Owing to its politico-economic objectives, the Trump administration had embarked upon a speedy pull-out from Afghanistan without attaching due consideration to the faltering operational capacities of the Afghan forces, in the absence of the NATO forces.⁷ While the upcoming Biden administration may continue troops withdrawal, yet the withdrawal is expected to be responsible and sustainable, with an underlining emphasis on counter-terrorism and counter-violence in Afghanistan.⁸ The over-arching stake of the U.S. shall however remain to end its decades-long combat role in the war-ravaged country.⁹

ASSESSING THE PROBABILITY OF AN INTRA-AFGHAN CEASEFIRE

The on-set of the intra-Afghan peace talks is a watershed moment in the political history of Afghanistan as it brings the two main warring factions to the table for the first time ever.¹⁰ In this regard, it is pertinent to mention that both the Geneva Peace Process and the Bonn Agreement had failed to engage all relevant stakeholders inclusively.¹¹ Hence, on the premise of ensuring inclusivity of all the stake-holders, the intra-Afghan peace talks may be expected to borne positive results.

⁵ "Terrorists in Afghanistan", *Dawn News*, last modified July 28, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1571556>

⁶ Vanda Felbab Brown, "A Bri(dge) Too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise and Limitations Of China's Involvement in Afghanistan." *Brookings Institute* (2020).

⁷ Khan Sohrab, "How Trump Administration set Afghanistan up to fail" *The Diplomat*, last modified November 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/how-the-trump-administration-set-afghanistan-up-to-fail/>

⁸ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. Troops Are Still Leaving, but Afghans Hope Biden Will Help", *The New York Times*, last modified November 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/world/asia/biden-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>

⁹ "Five Things to Know About the Afghan Peace Talks", *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified September 14, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/five-things-know-about-afghan-peace-talks>

¹⁰ Khan Sohrab, "How Trump Administration set Afghanistan up to fail" *The Diplomat*, last modified November 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/how-the-trump-administration-set-afghanistan-up-to-fail/>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

More importantly, given the decades long engagement in an economically and militarily exhausting civil-war, coupled with the Afghan Taliban's bid to develop a diplomatic footprint and garner acceptance internationally may force the Afghan Taliban to come to terms with the Afghan government.¹² On the other hand, the Afghan government too realises the centrality of an unhindered international aid and assistance for the smooth functioning of the government.¹³

Peace in Afghanistan has remained a lesser-available commodity since long. Warring factions have continually relapsed into fighting over and over again. In practical terms, the ongoing Afghan peace process has also been experiencing delays over differences. While the two contending parties have depicted their wilfulness for the peace talks lately, factors like administration change in the U.S. may cause if not disruption, then at least some delay in the process. Another key factor that shall determine the trajectory and future of a post-ceasefire Afghanistan is the terms of agreement regarding and differences over the terms of agreement (specifically over the nature of political governance of Afghanistan and the role of religion.¹⁴ Additionally, another hindrance may arrive from forces that are already dubious of Taliban's political mainstreaming. For instance, owing to its troubled relationship with the Taliban, India increasingly finds its economic and strategic stakes plunging into futility.¹⁵ Additionally, the Islamic State – Khorasan Province's (IS-KP) with its heavy-handed presence in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, along with its ability to inflict large-scale damage within the country, may pose serious challenges to peace prospects in Afghanistan.¹⁶

PAKISTAN'S PLACE IN A POST-CEASEFIRE AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan's diplomatic manoeuvring in Afghanistan has allowed forging a workable relationship with the Afghan government and the Taliban, both. The current policy posture stems from Pakistan's realisation of the centrality of both the Afghan government and the Taliban

¹² Hanif Sufizada, "Afghanistan's Economy – and Access to Aid – at Stake in Peace Talks", *The Diplomat*, last modified October 8, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/afghanistans-economy-and-access-to-aid-at-stake-in-peace-talks/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Five Things to Know About the Afghan Peace Talks", *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified September 14, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/five-things-know-about-afghan-peace-talks>

¹⁵ Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyas Shende, "Dealing With the Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal", *Carnegie India*, last modified June 2, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/02/dealing-with-taliban-india-s-strategy-in-afghanistan-after-u.s.-withdrawal-pub-81951>

¹⁶ Abdul Sayed and Colin P. Clarke, "The Islamic State in Afghanistan Is Down, but Not Out", *RAND Corporation*, last modified September 14, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/09/the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-is-down-but-not-out.html>

to the political future of Afghanistan. The government of Pakistan has diplomatically facilitated the Afghan peace process and categorically recognised the centrality of Afghan Taliban to peace in Afghanistan. In August 2020, the Taliban also visited Pakistan for discussions over the peace process following the invitation of Pakistan's foreign minister. Further in November, Prime Minister Khan officially visited Afghanistan and met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani for the same purpose.¹⁷ In response, the Afghan president also accepted Prime Minister Khan's invitation to visit Pakistan.¹⁸ In the light of above facts, Pakistan may be foreseen as playing the role of a major proponent of political stability and peace in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan remains clear over the threat of cross-border terrorism that has historically emanated from Afghanistan. Most recently, Pakistan's foreign minister publicly unravelled intelligence-based findings on anti-Pakistan terrorist activities taking place in India and Afghanistan. Hence, in a post-ceasefire Afghanistan, Pakistan seeks to establish a workable relationship with Kabul, with an underlining emphasis on its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN IN POST-CEASEFIRE AFGHANISTAN

A ceasefire between the warring groups of Afghanistan signifies the nearing of a truce in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, Afghanistan as a peaceful neighbour presents the prospects of regional connectivity and bilateral economic partnership, delineating economic as well as political dividends for both Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁹ Pakistan's facilitation of the U.S.-Taliban peace talks makes room for Pakistan to cooperate with the Afghan government, post-ceasefire, in the following spheres:

Regional Connectivity and Bilateral Trade

Bolstering Pak-Afghan trade relations on the premise of enhancing mutual trade and providing transit trade routes to landlocked Afghanistan can serve as an effective premise for a sustainable cooperation in a post-ceasefire Afghanistan. A politically stable Afghanistan having functional ties with Pakistan shall enable Pakistan in materialising its position as a strategic connector in the region and allow Afghanistan to rebuild its trade infrastructure.²⁰ While Pakistan counts

¹⁷ Rahim Faiez, "Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan on 'Historic' First Visit to Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, last modified November 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/pakistans-prime-minister-khan-on-historic-first-visit-to-afghanistan/>

¹⁸ Mariana Baabar, "Ashraf Ghani to visit Pakistan", *The News*, last modified November 21, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/746896-ashraf-ghani-to-visit-pakistan>

¹⁹ Mosharraf Zaidi, "Five Opportunities for 2020", *The News*, last modified December 31, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/591074-five-opportunities-for-2020>

²⁰ Ibid.

among one of Afghanistan's largest trading partners, the bilateral economic ties between the two countries have intermittently become hostage of the changing geopolitical environment of the region.²¹ Bilateral trade volume between the two countries has declined from US\$ 2.5 billion in the fiscal year (FY) 2011 to \$1.3 billion in FY 2019.²² While Pakistan's imports from Afghanistan have experienced a considerably upward trend, yet Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan have declined over the years. (See figure 1 and figure 2). According to latest data by the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan were worth US\$1.18 billion in 2019.²³ However, in FY 2019-2020, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan decreased to around 25%.²⁴ Currently, (as of November 2020) the government of Pakistan seeks to increase the country's export target to US\$ 5 billion the coming three years.²⁵

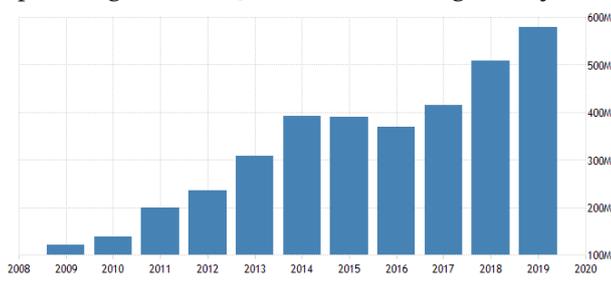


Figure 1- Pakistan's imports from Afghanistan (2009-2019)²⁶

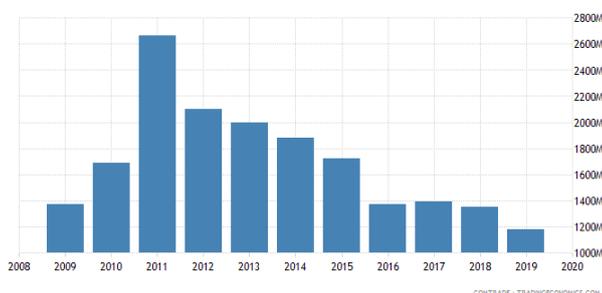


Figure 2: Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan (2009-2019)²⁷

²¹ Ishrat Husain and Muhammad Ather Elahi, "The Future of Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Relations", *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified August 17, 2015, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/08/future-afghanistan-pakistan-trade-relations>

²² "Govt sets '\$5b Afghan export target'", *The Express Tribune*, last modified November 9, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2271627/govt-sets-5b-afghan-export-target>

²³ "Pakistan Exports to Afghanistan", *Trading Economics*, date accessed January 4, 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/exports/afghanistan#:~:text=Pakistan%20exports%20to%20Afghanistan%20was,updated%20on%20December%20of%202020>

²⁴ "Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan decrease 25pc in 11 months", *The Nation*, last modified July 17, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/17-Jul-2020/pakistan-s-exports-to-afghanistan-decrease-25pc-in-11-months>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Pakistan Imports from Afghanistan", *Trading Economics*, date accessed: January 4, 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/imports/afghanistan>

²⁷ "Pakistan Export to Afghanistan", *Trading Economics*, date accessed January 4, 2021, <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/exports/afghanistan#:~:text=Pakistan%20exports%20to%20Afghanistan%20was,updated%20on%20December%20of%202020>

In recent years the Afghan government has also displayed its good-will for regional cooperation and connectivity. This policy shift has particularly gained momentum following the deceleration in the progress of the Chahbahar Port in 2018.²⁸ In the process, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, during his visit to Pakistan in July 2019, requested Pakistan's Prime Minister to facilitate the implementation of transit trade with Afghanistan along with enabling 24/7 functioning of the Torkham border.²⁹

Moreover, in the same year, Afghanistan initiated trilateral talks with China and Pakistan with the aim of engaging itself in regional trade apparatus by deepening regional connectivity via initiatives like BRI, Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) and others. In this regard, the project of constructing a motorway connecting Pakistan's city of Peshawar to Kabul in Afghanistan has also been undertaken under the China Afghanistan Pakistan Plus Cooperation (CAPPCC) initiative.³⁰ This initiative, on the one hand, will directly incorporate Afghanistan into China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and on the other hand, allow Pakistan to explore its potential of connecting to Central Asian and Middle Eastern states via Afghanistan.³¹ Most recently, in June last year, the government of Pakistan has reopened its three major trade routes with Afghanistan, which include the Chaman border crossing, the Torkham border terminal and the Ghulam Khan terminal.³²

²⁸ Andrew Hannah, "The Broken Promise of Chahbahar", *United States Institute of Peace*, last modified October 8, 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/oct/08/broken-promise-chahbahar>

²⁹ Najma Mihas, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Trade: New Opportunities and Challenges", *Global Village Space*, last modified September 7, 2019, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-afghan-transit-trade-new-opportunities-and-challenges/>

³⁰ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Is China Set to Play a Greater Role in Afghanistan", *The New Arab*, last modified January 30, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/1/30/will-china-play-a-greater-role-in-afghanistan>

³¹ Mosharraf Zaidi, "Five Opportunities for 2020", *The News*, last modified December 31, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/591074-five-opportunities-for-2020>

³² Amir Latif, "Pakistan reopens 2 routes for trade with Afghanistan", *Anadolu Agency*, last modified June 20, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-reopens-2-routes-for-trade-with-afghanistan/1884146>

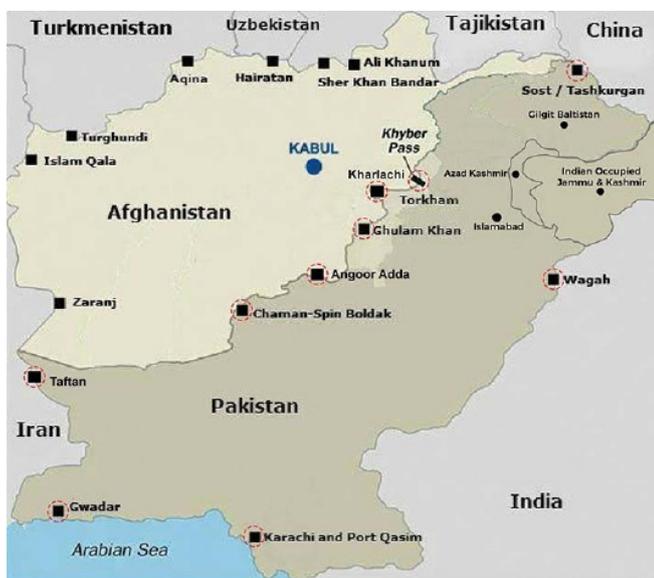


Figure 3: Map showing Pakistan-Afghanistan transit trade terminals³³

As the prospects of bilateral trade with Afghanistan increase, an increase in land-based bi-lateral commerce in goods, services, cross-border investments and developmental projects may bolster Pakistan’s bilateral economic cooperation with Afghanistan. While Afghanistan’s private business sector is already involved in Pakistani markets via formal/ informal channels, Pakistan may incentivise and establish structural mechanisms for enabling Afghanistan’s private sector for investing in Pakistan-Afghanistan trade corridors.³⁴ Moreover, given the fact that services sector increasingly relies on the availability of human capital, which Afghanistan lacks, Pakistan can also explore different areas of bilateral trade in services sector. This shall however, hinge on policy making and resource allocation to visa-facilitation initiatives, logistical support, and information availability. Moreover, the two countries can also cooperate in the field of infrastructure development in Afghanistan. While trade in services and developmental sectors may come with some constraints, however, Pakistan-Afghanistan trade corridors must be readied to serve as the hub of bilateral economic activity between the two states.

Political Reconciliation

From Bush administration to Trump’s, Washington’s reliance on Islamabad for achieving its political and strategic goals in Kabul has remained a key component

³³ Najma Minhas, “Pakistan Afghan Transit Trade: New Opportunities and Challenges”, *Global Village Space*, last modified September 7, 2019, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-afghan-transit-trade-new-opportunities-and-challenges/>

³⁴ Mahmood Khalid, “Potential for Economic Cooperation with Afghanistan: Proximity Geo-Economic Nexus”, *PIDE*, last modified December 20, 2019, <https://pide.org.pk/blog/potential-for-economic-cooperation-with-afghanistan-proximity-geo-economic-nexus/>

of its south Asian policy.³⁵ Pakistan has also endorsed its relevance in the region for achieving a truce in Afghanistan.³⁶ The current U.S.-Taliban Peace deal heavily relied on Pakistan due to its ability to effectively negotiate with the Afghan Taliban, and is being hailed as a win-win situation for Pakistan.³⁷

While the government of Pakistan has been able to make the most out of the current situation, it is imperative for it to continue playing the role of a peace-maker in Afghanistan. This entails Pakistan’s consistent support for a political truce between the Afghan government and Taliban during the intra-Afghan peace talks and ahead of them. In this regard, Pakistan needs to exert a consistent yet measured pressure on the Afghan Taliban for renouncing violence, along with developing a conciliatory outlook with the Afghan government.

Aiming to facilitate the Intra-Afghan Peace talks, the government of Pakistan also devised the post of Pakistan’s Special Envoy to Afghanistan.³⁸ The appointment of Amb. (rtd.) Muhammad Tariq, a seasoned Pakistani diplomat has been made with the expectation of stepping up Pakistan’s diplomatic positioning in Afghanistan.³⁹

Human Security

Attributing to decades of war, militancy and insurgency in the country, the state of human security remains disappointingly low in Afghanistan. Despite the inflow of international aids aiming at improving of human security, the country’s performance on the multi-dimensional human development index has failed to substantially take off. (See figure 4) In 2000, Afghanistan’s HDI value was recorded to be 0.302. In the subsequent 19 years, Afghanistan’s HDI value has risen to 0.511 only (as recorded for year 2019), categorising it in the low human development category.⁴⁰

³⁵ Zalmay Khalilzad and James Dobbins, “Pakistan holds the Key to Peace in Afghanistan”, *The RAND Blog*, last modified January 11, 2011, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/01/pakistan-holds-the-key-to-peace-in-afghanistan.html>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Umair Jamal, “What Has Pakistan Gained From the US-Taliban Peace Deal?”, *The Diplomat*, last modified March 6, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/what-has-pakistan-gained-from-the-us-taliban-peace-deal/>

³⁸ Anadolu, “Peace Talks with Taliban held by Pakistan Envoy”, *Global Village Space*, last modified June 20, 2020, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistan-envoy-for-afghanistan-holds-talks-with-taliban/>

³⁹ Mariana Baabar, “Mohammad Sadiq appointed as special envoy to Afghanistan”, *The News*, last modified June 7, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/669221-mohammad-sadiq-appointed-as-special-envoy-to-afghanistan>

⁴⁰ “Afghanistan”, *Human Development Report 2020*. New York: United Nations Development Program, date accessed January 4, 2021, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/AFG.pdf

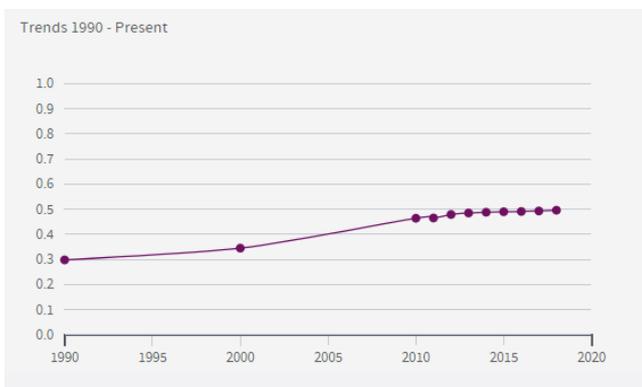


Figure 4: Afghanistan on Multi-Dimensional Human Development Index (1990-2019)⁴¹

Apart from poverty, unemployment, and the lack of education, other human security issues specific to conflict zones exclusively are widely rampant in Afghanistan. Some of which include: population displacement, drug abuse, child labour, human trafficking, and sexual violence against women and children.⁴²

While consecutive democratically-elected governments have failed to address the lowly state of human security in the war-ravaged country, it is feared that Taliban's entry into Afghanistan's political apparatus might yield a greater damage.⁴³ This concern mainly stems from Taliban regime's rock-bottom human rights records specifically regarding women, children and minorities. The U.S.-Taliban peace deal also misses binding the Afghan Taliban into committing to human rights.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, with Joe Biden in power, U.S. can be expected to attach some focus on human rights in Afghanistan.

However, for Pakistan to shield the intra-Afghan peace process and the forthcoming political stability against such a blow, it is pertinent that efforts be made for committing the Taliban to human rights. As much as this can be a daunting challenge for Pakistan, if accomplished, this shall strengthen the standing of a politically-settled government and also encourage Afghan public opinion in Pakistan's favour.

Peacebuilding

While a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban is an eminent probability, peacebuilding in the war-ravaged Afghan society is highly pertinent for mitigating the risk of the country

⁴¹ "Human Development Reports – Afghanistan", *United Nations Development Program*, accessed June 22, 2020, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AFG>

⁴² Muhammad Rehan Rasheed, "Afghanistan's Human Security Challenges", *The Daily Times*, last modified May 24, 2018, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/243792/afghanistans-human-security-challenges/>

⁴³ Farahnaz Isphahani, "The US-Taliban Deal Ignores Human Rights and Women", *The Diplomat*, last modified March 6, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/the-us-taliban-deal-ignores-human-rights-and-women/>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

relapsing into conflict. Peacebuilding initiatives in Afghanistan have remained limited in both width and depth, thereby yielding little results.⁴⁵ However, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan leave ample room for Pakistan to contribute into peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan can range from generating national public consensus for the politically settled government to strengthening Afghanistan's political and administrative capacities.⁴⁶ Taking advantage of Pakistan's linguistic and cultural congruence with several Afghan ethnicities, Pakistan can initiate research and development projects based on primary resources. Information and resource sharing can be another way of contributing to peacebuilding. Committing to facilitation of peacebuilding in Afghanistan shall enable Pakistan in developing a soft image across Afghan political and societal sectors.

CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN IN A POST-CEASEFIRE AFGHANISTAN

Despite developments taking place in a positive direction, there exist number of challenges that Pakistan may face in terms of its future policy in Afghanistan. Some of them are as under:

Terrorism

Countering the threat of militancy and terrorism is a key national security concern for Pakistan. In recent years, Pakistan's counter-terror initiatives have yielded positive outcomes as the trajectory of terror incidents has turned downwards with Pakistan experiencing record-low terror incidents in 2019 since 2006.⁴⁷

However, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is feared to lend operational space to the militant groups operating in Afghanistan to expand their activities in Pakistan. With its core currently operating from Afghanistan, the Al Qaeda is already known for sharing a symbiotic relationship with the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁸ While the IS-KP is under the radar of the U.S. forces and Taliban, its drive to establish a strong foothold in South Asia cannot be ignored either. On the other hand, while a targeted

⁴⁵ Muhammad Ehsan Zia, "An Analysis of Peacebuilding Approaches in Afghanistan", *Asia Society*, accessed: 23 June 23, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/analysis-peacebuilding-approaches-afghanistan#direct>

⁴⁶ Max Boot, "Back to Nation-building in Afghanistan. Good.", *The New York Times*, last modified August 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/opinion/president-trump-nation-building-afghanistan.html>

⁴⁷ "Global Terrorism Index 2020: The ten countries most impacted by terrorism", *Vision of Humanity*, date accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/global-terrorism-index-2020-the-ten-countries-most-impacted-by-terrorism/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20Pakistan%20recorded%20its,and%2086%20per%20cent%2C%20respectively.>

⁴⁸ Secunder Kermani, "Al-Qaeda still 'heavily embedded' within Taliban in Afghanistan, UN official warns", *BBC News*, last modified October 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54711452>

campaign against the TTP has escalated in Afghanistan, the probability of TTP resurging in Pakistan cannot be ruled out. Most recently in August 2020, the TTP reunified with its two splinter groups, the Jamat-ul-Ahrar, and the Hizb-ul-Ahrar in a bid to revive its relevance to the militant landscape in Pakistan.⁴⁹

Of more significance to Pakistan, are the Baloch ethno-nationalist movements that gain external support from India, Iran and Afghanistan.⁵⁰ India's direct support to leaders and cadre of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Republican Army (BRA) is on-record.^{51 52} In this regard, the Pak-Afghan border, currently being fenced though, inhabits culturally and linguistically congruent populations and has historically played a key role in bolstering cross-border terrorism.⁵³

Proxy Warfare Between India and Pakistan

Owing to its long-standing political instability, Afghanistan has remained a theatre harbouring global, regional and extra-regional powers.⁵⁴ In order to secure their strategic and political interests, India and Pakistan have also struggled to gain their influence in the country. Pakistan has historically sought to achieve strategic depth in Afghanistan and mitigate Indian influence in the country by supporting the Afghan Taliban.⁵⁵ India, on the other hand has sought to provide Afghanistan with economic aid, military assistance, and infrastructural investment to establish its strategic footprint in Afghanistan. India has continually supported anti-Pakistan elements covertly in Afghanistan⁵⁶ The absence of state apparatus and the rule of law across wide swathes of Afghan territory have provided operational

⁴⁹ Sajad Ahmed, "Dissecting the reunification of TTP", *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, last modified October 21, 2020, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/dissecting-the-reunification-of-ttp/>

⁵⁰ Maryam Raashed, "Current and Emerging Terrorism Challenges for Pakistan", *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, last modified January 7, 2020, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/current-and-emerging-terrorism-challenges/>

⁵¹ Bharti Jain, "Baloch leader Brahamdagh Bugti's plea for asylum on hold?", *The Times of India*, last modified January 23, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/56725500.cms>

⁵² Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Explained: the Baloch Liberation Army", *The Hindu*, last modified July 3, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-the-baloch-liberation-army/article28273960.ece>

⁵³ Hayat Akbari, "Durand Line Border Dispute Remains Point Of Contention For Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations", *Global Security Review*, last modified June 7, 2020, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/durand-line-border-dispute-contention-afghanistan-pakistan-relations/>

⁵⁴ Shan A. Zain, "Is Afghanistan on the brink of a Middle-East proxy war as US looks to exit?", *The New Arab*, last modified March 10, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/3/10/is-afghanistan-on-the-brink-of-middle-east-proxy-war>

⁵⁵ Hanauer, Larry and Chalk, Peter. *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2012. accessed June 23,2020. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf

⁵⁶ Shamil Shams, "India and Pakistan Battle for Afghanistan", *DW News*, last modified November 19, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-and-pakistan-battle-for-afghanistan/a-18073889>

space to the number of militant groups, gaining external support from different regional countries.

The withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan might escalate India-Pakistan proxyism in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ It is worthwhile to register that Pakistan has emerged as an influential player during the current peace talks and therefore it is pertinent that Pakistan continues to push for a political settlement that guarantees Pakistan's greater relevance in Afghan policymaking circles.

Pakistan's Decreasing Market in Afghanistan

Bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan can serve as an effective premise for establishing a working relationship with the politically negotiated Afghan government. However, a key issue in this regard is Pakistan's decreasing market share in Afghanistan resulting from the oft-turbulent Pak-Afghan ties. Pakistan's traditional market share in Afghanistan is now being secured by countries like India, China and Iran.⁵⁸ In 2018, when Pakistan imports to Afghanistan estimated worth \$1 billion, Indian export to Afghanistan valued around \$354 million.⁵⁹ While Pakistani goods constituted 15% of Afghanistan's imports, Iran and China constituted 17% and 16% of Afghanistan's total imports. (See Figure 5) Moreover, as Indian imports to Afghanistan are increasing, Pakistani imports are experiencing a downward trend. In the first three quarters of 2019, Afghanistan's imports from Pakistan significantly declined.⁶⁰

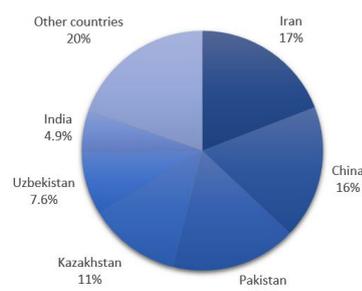


Figure 5: Pie Chart showing Afghanistan's imports (country-wise) for FY 2018⁶¹

⁵⁷ Zachary Con stantino, "The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, last modified January 29, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/india-pakistan-rivalry-afghanistan>

⁵⁸ Javed Mirza, "Pakistan losing Afghan market to trade rivals: TDAP", *The News*, last modified February 22, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/617977-pakistan-losing-afghan-market-to-trade-rivals-tdap>

⁵⁹ "Afghanistan Imports by Country", *Trading Economics*, accessed 22 June, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/imports-by-country>

⁶⁰ Javed Mirza, "Pakistan losing Afghan market to trade rivals: TDAP", *The News*, last modified February 22, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/617977-pakistan-losing-afghan-market-to-trade-rivals-tdap>

⁶¹ "Afghanistan Imports by Country" *Trading Economics*, date accessed January 4, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/imports-by-country>

Another aspect of Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral trade is that Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan overwhelmingly constitute raw materials and nonvalue-added goods like sugar, cereals, vegetables, wood, oil, and live animals.⁶² On the other hand, countries like India and China mainly export value-added goods like electrical equipment, machinery and fabric.^{63 64} Moreover, these countries offer better consignment handling facilities and transit tariffs.⁶⁵

Afghan Refugees

Pakistan is currently a host to world's largest refugee population, with around 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.⁶⁶ This refugee influx has come at the cost of Pakistan's economic, political, security and societal imperatives. The normalisation of Afghan culture in tandem with the Afghan refugees has exacerbated criminalisation, weaponisation, drug trafficking, and drug consumption trends in Pakistani society.⁶⁷ These refugees also became the drivers of terrorism as Madrassahs situated along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and tribal areas became the hubs of terrorist activities, drug trafficking and drug consumption.⁶⁸

While Afghan refugees have repatriated back in large numbers, yet a comprehensive repatriation has not been accomplished. Refugee repatriation has faced a serious setback in recent years with the eruption of humanitarian crises, particularly in Syria and Myanmar, leaving United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s attention divided.⁶⁹ In this case, lack of financial instability in Afghanistan might become a centrifugal force for the returnees.⁷⁰ Also, refugee repatriation shall hinge on Afghanistan's absorption

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ "Afghanistan Imports from China" *Trading Economics*, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/imports/china>

⁶⁴ "Afghanistan Imports from India", *Trading Economics*, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/imports/india>

⁶⁵ Javed Mirza, "Pakistan losing Afghan market to trade rivals: TDAP", *The News*, last modified February 22, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/617977-pakistan-losing-afghan-market-to-trade-rivals-tdap>

⁶⁶ "Pakistan world's largest host of refugees: UNHCR", *Express Tribune*, last modified April 16, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1686897/1-pakistan-worlds-largest-host-refugees-unhcr/?amp=1>

⁶⁷ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Impact of The Afghan War on Pakistan", *Pakistan Horizon* 41, No. 1 (1988): 23-45, date accessed: June 24, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41394475>

⁶⁸ Anchita Borthakur, "Afghan Refugees: The Impact on Pakistan", *Asian Affairs* 48, No. 3 (2017): 488-509, date accessed: June 24, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03068374.2017.1362871>

⁶⁹ Waqar Maroof Khan, "40 years of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan", *The News*, last modified September 4, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/521786-40-years-of-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan>

⁷⁰ "Afghan returnees face economic difficulties, unemployment", *The World Bank*, last modified July 14, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/07/14/afghan-returnees-face-economic-difficulties-unemployment>

capacity and security situation.

WAY FORWARD

The government of Pakistan has adopted a positively opportunistic policy towards the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan has served as the core facilitator of a probable political settlement in Afghanistan and a guarantor of U.S.' interests in South Asia. This policy outlook shall help Pakistan achieve friendly relations in Afghanistan, secure its strategic goals in there and exacerbate U.S' dependence on Pakistan for executing its South Asian policy.⁷¹ However, an optimal capitalisation of the emerging regional developments requires the government of Pakistan to strictly adhere to the facilitation of the peace process and endorse its role as the peacemaker in Afghanistan. Also, it is imperative for Pakistan to acquire an all-inclusive approach and engage all the stakeholders in Afghanistan in order to secure a working relationship with different sectors of Afghan political and administrative apparatus.

Moreover, Pakistan needs to forgo of its historical security-centric approach towards Afghanistan and needs to forge its ties based on geoeconomic constants. An increased trade and economic interdependence of Afghanistan over Pakistan will render Afghanistan to pursue amicable relations with Pakistan. This however hinges on infrastructure building that can allow quicker and cost-effective transit trade to Afghanistan. Pakistan also needs to export value-added and finished goods to Afghanistan in order to secure bigger markets in Afghanistan. In order to boost formal trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan, channels of illicit trade and smuggling also needs to be overruled. Pakistan should also strive to enable a favourable customs and consignments infrastructure to facilitate easy and unhindered trade.

Also, while Pakistan has actively contributed to the peacemaking process in Afghanistan, a long-term engagement with Afghanistan hinges on its peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. Owing to the ethnic and political divide in Afghanistan, peacebuilding can be a highly challenging affair.⁷² However, Pakistan can facilitate Afghanistan in strengthening its national capacities for achieving a long-lasting and sustainable peace. Pakistan can cooperate with Afghanistan in areas like, capacity building of law enforcement agencies, judicial bodies and local governance bodies, deradicalization of combatants, reintegration of ex-combatants in the

⁷¹ MK Bhadrakumar, "For peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan is the key", *Asia Times*, last modified March 3, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/03/for-peace-in-afghanistan-pakistan-is-the-key/>

⁷² "Peacebuilding in Afghanistan", *The Crisis Group*, last modified September 29, 2003, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/peacebuilding-afghanistan>

society, rehabilitation of human rights, and boosting education sector. This can be done via resource and information sharing on state, institutional as well as individual level.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral relations remain one of the key aspects that define the composition and execution of Pakistan's foreign as well as its national security policy. While the government of Pakistan has displayed a pragmatically proactive approach in its foreign policy towards Afghanistan, it is of great significance for Pakistan, that the nature of Pak-Afghan state-level interactions transforms from a "security-centric approach" to a "wealth-driven" approach. This entails resolving internecine bilateral differences and investing in initiatives that allow bilateral cooperation. In this regard, a ceasefire in Afghanistan provides the impetus to Pakistan for resetting its relations with Afghanistan and reasserting itself as the facilitator of peace. While state-to-state level interaction is to be the dominant modus, people-to-people contacts can serve as an effective way of generating a positive soft image in Afghanistan. However, at no point can Pakistan afford to compromise its security interests and therefore mitigating the threat of trans-border terrorism must constitute among the top priorities for Islamabad.