



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

# Pak- Afghan Relations: Come Back to the Boardroom

**Amina Khan,** Research Fellow, ISSI

July 26, 2016

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are once again at an all time low following a series of clashes along the Pak – Afghan border which have led to fatalities on both sides. Pakistan has long been calling for stronger border management including the recent proposal for the construction of a gate at the Torkham crossing. However, the Afghan government has strongly opposed all border initiatives. In June 2016, Pakistan had announced new border rules including the construction of a gate at Torkham for ‘facilitating cross-border movement,’ ‘a necessity to check and verify all those crossing the border’ and ‘stop militants from crossing into Pakistan.’<sup>1</sup> Pakistan’s foreign office stated that although Afghan authorities had been intimated about Pakistan’s initiatives at Torkham, the Afghan’s resorted to unprovoked firing which resulted in the death of Major Jawad Ali Changezi well as an Afghan soldier.<sup>2</sup>

Following border clashes, public demonstrations were held in both countries to express immense anger over the incident. In Afghanistan, mass rallies were held against Pakistan in Jalalabad and Lashkar Gah where Pakistani flags were burnt and slogans of ‘death to Pakistan’ were chanted. Similarly in Pakistan, emotions ran high amongst the public who demanded the expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan.

As a result of these tensions, Pakistan and Afghanistan decided to cease the blame game and set up a bilateral mechanism to discuss matters related to border management and security in order to prevent recurrence of border skirmishes in the future. The agreement was reached during talks between a visiting Afghan delegation, headed by Deputy Foreign Minister, Hikmat Khalil Karzai, and the Pakistani side, represented by Foreign Secretary, Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry, on June 21, 2016.<sup>3</sup> Despite Pakistan’s conciliatory approach, and a call for closer cooperation, the Afghan government reverted to the blame game, accusing Pakistan of “continuing to distinguish between good and bad terrorists.”<sup>4</sup> Speaking at the NATO summit in Warsaw, on July 9, 2016, President Ashraf Ghani said that “despite Pakistan’s commitment to a quadrilateral peace process, it continues to support the Taliban”. He further went on to say that “Afghanistan’s regional initiatives were beginning to yield significant cooperative dividends ... with the exception of Pakistan.”<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the tirade of Rahmatullah Nabil, the former head of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) who accused the Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) of supporting the Taliban as well as the Haqqani network.<sup>6</sup>

Pakistan and Afghanistan had witnessed a marked improvement in relations, particularly after the government of national unity came into power in November 2014. Improving ties with Pakistan was a major priority of President Ghani, who expressed that “partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan’s foreign policy,” and “Pakistan's cooperation was key to the peace process.”<sup>7</sup> However,

these gains have been limited and short-lived. Certain elements within Afghanistan continue to mistrust Pakistan, particularly the Afghan intelligence agency. Time and again, Afghan authorities have resorted to accusing Pakistan for all the ills in the country including the surge in violence, abetting the Taliban and being an obstacle to the peace process. Therefore, the current spate of accusations levelled against Pakistan is not a new phenomenon nor is this unexpected. For quite some time, domestic pressure has been building on President Ghani due to his overtures towards Pakistan. In fact, the sentiment in Kabul has been so hostile that it led to the resignation of Rahmatullah Nabil as director of the NDS due to differences with President Ghani over his decision to attend the ministerial conference in Pakistan last year as well as Pakistan's role in the reconciliation process.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to highlight that Afghanistan's stance regarding Pakistan's role in Afghanistan as well as the peace process has been characterized by ambiguity, suspicion and contradictions. Afghan authorities blame Pakistan for supporting the Taliban, yet they continue to solicit Pakistan to play a role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Due to continuous allegations levelled against Pakistan of interference, Pakistan decided to limit its participation to only support the peace process, maintaining that the process should be Afghan lead and owned. However, President Ghani persistently insisted that Pakistan should play a bigger role and facilitate talks with the Afghan Taliban. Hence, at the behest of the Afghan government, Pakistan did what the Afghan's had requested – they brought the Taliban to the negotiating table. Despite several attempts by Pakistan to facilitate talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the Afghan government have failed to make headway with the group.

The Afghan leadership must take ownership of the responsibilities as well as failures in Afghanistan. Talking to the Taliban and finding a plausible solution to the conflict is an Afghan prerogative and responsibility. It is for the Afghan leadership to determine how and when to proceed with the peace process. Therefore, instead of pinning the responsibility for success or failure of the peace talks on Pakistan, they need to move beyond the rhetoric, blame game, and get their house in order.

While the international community has failed to bring stability to Afghanistan, the Afghan government have also failed to deliver. Hence, one of the reasons for pinning the responsibility for the failure of talks on Pakistan has been the Afghan government's inability to deliver on so many fronts, be it governance, peace and security or establishing peace with the Taliban. According to a report released by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 'Afghanistan is worse off today than it was before the 2001.'<sup>9</sup> Despite nearly 15 years into the US intervention and the state of affairs in

Afghanistan have constantly deteriorated with a marked increase in violence and casualties. The country continues to be confronted by weak and ineffective governance, corruption and a booming narcotic's trade that accounts for more than 90 per cent of the world's opium. The country also continues to stand highly divided on the issue of the Taliban and has yet to develop national consensus as well as a national narrative. President Ghani, like his predecessor, has been unable to galvanize and win domestic support, (particularly from within his government) and devise a viable national reintegration programme. Inviting the Taliban to join the peace process is only part of the initiative. The Afghan government needs to develop viable proposals and be willing to accommodate the demands of the Taliban in order to make the negotiations successful. In short a common ground needs to be agreed upon that accommodates the interests of the Afghan government as well as the Taliban. Fissures within the coalition and potential forces inside the Afghan government are problematic as are differences with the Taliban.

It is imperative to highlight that every time a breakthrough in talks with the Taliban is eminent, the process has been jeopardised – be it the case of the Murree talks or Mullah Mansoor's death. The Murree peace talks were sabotaged by the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death by the NDS despite Pakistan's plea not to call the talks off. Similarly, it has been revealed that Mullah Mansoor had agreed to join peace talks but was targeted by a US drone strike before he could make the announcement. In fact the Taliban stated that Mullah Mansoor's killing was a "deliberate effort to scuttle peace talks"<sup>10</sup> considering the fact that he had agreed to unveil his policy about peace negotiations.<sup>11</sup> Hence in both circumstances, one cannot but question the relevance of the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death as well as the killing of Mullah Mansoor at such decisive moments in the peace process. It is evident that there is a deliberate effort on the part of certain quarters within and outside the Ghani administration that are trying to disrupt the peace process. As Noah Coburn has pointed out in his book, *Losing Afghanistan*, there are individuals and groups who have benefitted (financially as well as politically) from the US intervention. These beneficiaries will continue to use and justify violence to maintain their positions. Hence, if a compromise is achieved with the Taliban, the group will have to be accommodated politically. However, one questions whether those in control are willing to share power along with resources.

Despite the Afghan government's regular outbursts against Pakistan, the Pakistani leadership has demonstrated restraint and maturity. It has extended all efforts to clearly restore relations as well as revive peace talks. However, Afghan authorities have been less forthcoming on both issues. Pakistan has exerted whatever influence it has on the Taliban but the Afghan leadership must realize that Pakistan

has limitations of its own and cannot fight Afghanistan's war on its own soil. There are concerns that Pakistan's apparent tough stance on the Afghan Taliban could backfire and have dire consequences for the state, particularly in its tribal region and Baluchistan.

Pakistan's role in the peace process is vital. Ashraf Ghani has acknowledged that "partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan's foreign policy," and that "Pakistan's cooperation was key to the peace process."<sup>12</sup> Hence, it would be prudent for the Afghan leadership to continue peace talks as well as ease tensions with Pakistan instead of kowtowing to divisive elements opposed to both. Exerting pressure on Pakistan will not deliver peace in Afghanistan. On the contrary, it will only jeopardise the gains made so far in the peace process as well as between Pakistan and Afghanistan in their strained relationship. Pakistan and Afghanistan need to move forward and engage on a host of issues, and not limit their relationship to the peace process, important though it is.

#### Notes and References:

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Ali Akbar, "Pakistan, Afghanistan increase troop deployment across Torkham after deadly clashes", Dawn, June 14, 2016
  - <sup>2</sup> Ibid
  - <sup>3</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Pak-Afghan talks: Mechanism agreed to ensure border peace," *Express Tribune*, June 21, 2016
  - <sup>4</sup> Tahir Khan, "Peace overtures with Pakistan have failed, says Afghan leader," *Express Tribune*, July 10, 2016.
  - <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>6</sup> "Former Afghan Spy Chief Says Letters Show Pakistan Supports Militants," *New York Times*, July 15, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2016/07/15/world/asia/15reuters-afghanistan-taliban-pakistan.html?ref=asia&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2016/07/15/world/asia/15reuters-afghanistan-taliban-pakistan.html?ref=asia&_r=1)
  - <sup>7</sup> Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks," *Tolo News*, 11 December 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>
  - <sup>8</sup> Hamid Shalizi, "Afghan spy chief resigns after fallout with president," *Reuters*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-resignation-idUSKBN0TT1K720151210>
  - <sup>9</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Quarterly Report to the United States Congress April 2016, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2016-04-30qr.pdf>
  - <sup>10</sup> Tahir Khan, "Mullah Mansoor was 'about to join peace talks' when killed," *Express Tribune*, July 11, 2016
  - <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>12</sup> Tariq Majidi, "Ghani Says Peace Talks Will Start Within Weeks," *Tolo News*, 11 December 2015, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/22761-ghani-says-peace-talks-will-start-within-weeks>