



BREAKING THROUGH WITH KABUL WITH CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been on a downward trajectory since 2015, particularly after the collapse of the Murree peace talks following the disclosure of Mullah Omar’s death by the Afghan intelligence. Since then, relations have been at their lowest, where both countries have been entangled in a vicious blame game, mainly revolving around failure of the peace talks; counter-terrorism differences over the Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)/Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) militants; and reignited border clashes.

While Pakistan has made several attempts to resume talks with Afghanistan including Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua’s visit to Kabul in August 2017, Kabul’s response has been less than forthcoming. Kabul has continued to blame Pakistan for all the ills inside Afghanistan, including allegedly allowing terrorist activities against Afghanistan from its soil.

However, in what is being termed as a clear effort by Kabul to restore ties with Islamabad, President Ashraf Ghani, during his speech at the 72nd session of UN General Assembly, had called upon Pakistan to engage with Afghanistan in the Kabul Process “on a comprehensive state to state dialogue on peace, security, and regional cooperation... in the quest for peace and regional stability.”¹ Prior to his address at the UN, President Ghani had stated in Kabul that Afghanistan was

¹ Amir Khan, “Kabul willing to revive moribund quartet for peace,” *Express Tribune*, September 2, 2017.

"ready for comprehensive political talk with Pakistan [as] peace with Pakistan is in our national agenda." ²

President Ghani's overtures have been widely welcomed by both the civil and military leadership in Pakistan. They were acknowledged by Khawaja Asif, Pakistan's foreign minister, who reiterated Islamabad's commitment to play its due role in the peace and stability of Afghanistan.³ Ghani's comments also prompted a high level visit to Kabul by the Pakistani military Chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa to Kabul on October 1, 2017 including Pakistan's Intelligence Chief, Lt Gen Naveed Mukhtar, as well as Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua. This marked the first high-level visit from Pakistan in several months, clearly suggesting a renewed push by both sides to overcome their differences and revive ties.

President Ashraf Ghani held a one-on-one meeting with General Bajwa at the Presidential Palace in Kabul that was later followed by delegation-level talks. Issues related to "long-term peace, cooperation against the shared threats, coordination between respective counter-terrorism campaigns to restrict space for non-state actors, intelligence sharing, trade and commerce, and people-to-people contacts were discussed." ⁴ Reviving peace talks with the Afghan Taliban, as well as revival of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) Initiative between Kabul, China, US and Pakistan was also discussed.

In a reset of tense relations, General Bajwa reiterated Islamabad's support for the Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process and complete support and cooperation in the war against terrorism, including training and capacity building of Afghan Security Forces.⁵ President Ghani marked the meeting as a 'new season of relationship' and said that 'good opportunities of cooperation are being provided and both countries should get the most out of the current situation'.⁶ Ghani also emphasised that task teams should be set up by both sides in different sectors to form a clear cooperation framework and to take practical steps in this regard. Ghani also said that a monitoring mechanism should be established to make sure both sides implement their promises and that deadlines should be imposed. In this regard, both sides agreed to draft implementation plans.⁷

² Ibid.

³ "Pakistan will play its due role for peace in Afghanistan: Asif responds to Ghani's overture," *Express Tribune*, September 2, 2017.

⁴ Press Release, *Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan*, October 1, 2017, https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/t-press_release.asp?id=4287&print=1

⁵ Tahir Khan, "Pakistan, Afghanistan agree to bury the past, look forward to future," *Daily Times*, October 3, 2017.

⁶ "Gen Bajwa, Afghan President Ghani hold 'constructive' meeting in Kabul," *The News*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/233889-Gen-Bajwa-meets-Afghan-President-Ashraf-Ghani>

⁷ "Islamabad, Kabul begin 'new season' in bilateral ties," *Express Tribune*, October 1, 2017

President Ghani also accepted General Bajwa's offer to pay a visit to Pakistan before the end of the year.

Interestingly, former Afghan Taliban minister, Agha Jan Mutasim welcomed General Bajwa's visit to Kabul and President Ashraf Ghani's willingness to visit Pakistan. He called for enhanced dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan, terming it "a key to peace and stability in both countries and the region".⁸

It has also been reported that while Pakistan raised the issue of the TTP and the JuA sanctuaries based in Kunar and Nuristan, Afghanistan too raised the issue of the alleged presence of the Afghan Taliban based in Pakistan. According to reports, negotiations have been underway for the possible exchange of militants on both sides. The Afghan side has offered to hand over certain TTP members in exchange for Afghan Taliban in the custody of Islamabad. The first such offer was for Mufti Khalid aka Mohammad Khorasani, a senior TTP leader in exchange for Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. It is believed that Kabul is also considering the release of Latifullah Mehsud and Haji Faqir Muhammad, for other Afghan Taliban leaders based in Pakistan.⁹ While the offer has been made, as in the past, it remains to be seen whether Islamabad and Kabul are genuinely ready to proceed with the exchange of militants.

While the recent exchange has raised optimism, it is quite reminiscent of the same optics witnessed in the past when President Ghani came into power and a brief period of friendly ties was witnessed when for the first time, Afghan cadets trained at the Pakistani military academy in Abbottabad. Similarly, an unprecedented agreement was signed between the National Directorate of Security and Inter-Services Intelligence which has yet to be implemented. It may be recalled that the Afghan Intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), has been extremely critical in its views regarding Pakistan and vehemently opposed the MoU between the ISI and NDS, which ultimately led to the resignation of the head of the NDS, Rahmtullah Nabi. Hence, the current interaction between Kabul and Islamabad has little room for celebrating a breakthrough as yet because of the bitter experience of the past where suspicions, particularly on Kabul's side, have clouded efforts at reconciliation between the two neighbours. Ghani also continues to face domestic opposition, as many within the fragile set up in Kabul have openly opposed improving ties with Pakistan (including all offers for training Afghan forces), as well as establishing dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.

⁸ Tahir Khan, "Afghan Taliban leader welcomes Pak-Afghan dialogue," *Daily Times*, October 9, 2017.

⁹ Tahir Khan, "Kabul offers Khalid Khurasani in swap for Mullah Baradar," *Daily Times*, September 25, 2017.

While the interaction with Pakistan has largely been welcomed by the Afghan government, there have been voices of concern, particularly from the former heads of the NDS, chiefly Amrullah Saleh, and Rahmatullah Nabil who have "advised the Afghan government against Pakistan's duplicity."¹⁰

Similar interactions and pledges have been made in the past which have not delivered results.

Hence, much will depend on whether Kabul and Islamabad will overcome their differences and accept the offers made by Islamabad such as training of the ANSF, and the enforcement of the MoU signed between their respective intelligence agencies. Also, one will have to see whether Kabul (if at all) can balance its ties between Islamabad and New Delhi. After all, India too has offered to train the Afghan police. Hence, positive action needs to be seen from both sides on the pledges made before expressing any sense of hope or optimism.

In a welcome development, it appears that efforts on both sides to revive peace talks were witnessed in Muscat where representatives from Afghanistan, China, US and Pakistan took part in the sixth meeting of the QCG on October 16, 2017.¹¹ While no official statement has been given regarding the outcome of the initiative, Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Dr Abdullah Abdullah had said that, "the quadrilateral meeting between the four countries will improve Kabul-Islamabad relationship."¹² Hence while the meeting is certainly a much needed step in the right direction, the Afghan Taliban boycotted the meeting, scuttling hopes of the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In the larger context, it appears that any initiative, including the QCG, like previous ones, will not bear any results until the Taliban join the process. A political solution is the only solution to end the Afghan crisis, which cannot be achieved without establishing peace with the Taliban through constructive engagement and dialogue. Having said that, the fact that the QCG initiative has been revived after a lull of 16 months due to the killing of Taliban chief, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in May 2016 in a US drone strike, is a major step forward.

However, one will have to see if any tangible progress can be made with the Afghan Taliban, or whether the QCG will share the fate of erstwhile processes that have not delivered in the past. Until then, there needs to be cautious optimism on all sides.

¹⁰ "Bajwa's visit to Kabul a decisive move," *Afghanistan Times*, October 2, 2017, <http://afghanistantimes.af/bajwas-visit-to-kabul-a-deceive-move/>

¹¹ Saleh Al Shaibany, "Oman hosts meeting on Afghanistan peace talks," *The National*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/oman-hosts-meeting-on-afghanistan-peace-talks-1.667772>

¹² Anisa Shaheed, "Kabul Expects Positive Results From Quadrilateral Meeting," *Tolo News*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/kabul-expects-positive-results-quadrilateral-meeting>